. . . ka-Tung.

The machine energized with a sound much like an old black and white television set with a faulty high power unit. The hair on everyone's arms bristled and some papers in plastic document preservers curled toward the time machine. I looked at Monica Dodd. Her hair was wavering away from her face and inclining toward the metal cylinder. Her eyes grew large with apprehension but she made no attempt to catch her hair.

The surface of the gleaming cylinder wavered, almost a liquid translucence, and flashes of electricity jumped from the globes at the top of the cylinder to those at the bottom, cycling up and down again and again. I feared someone might be electrocuted before the demonstration ended.

PARTING SHOT

Pandora

Science Fiction Science Fantasy Magazine

Kerson Publishing Company • 6460-65 Convoy Court • San Diego, California 92117

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IN THIS ISSUE

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PARTING SHOT
Introduction

Monica Dodd arrived unannounced on the eleventh of August to confide that she had assembled a team of willing ex-GIs to accompany her on her trek into the misty forests ofprehistoric time and to ask again if I wanted to join the expedition to find her brother, reminding me that I was nearly out of time and that a decision was required before they translocated on the thirteenth of August, only two days hence.

"I think your expedition is not going to succeed," I said. "And even if you do find theexact time and location that he was sent, you and all your chums are not coming back, either."

"Why do you think so?" she asked.

"Because you are going to a place and time—if you actually make such a distant translocation—where very large carnivores will have you all for breakfast before you can unpack your guns, that's why."

"Well, you can stay here and face the people who are coming after you, or you can come with us and participate in the adventure of a lifetime."

"Besides," I continued, still lost in my own conversation, "what makes you think you arenot going to materialize in a steaming Cretaceous lake or ocean?"

"We've chosen our location with some precision. Our navigator is certain we will translocate to a forested plateau where... ."

"Navigator? Navigator? You have a navigator? What makes you think... ? The earth has changed in ways you cannot imagine in the last sixty-five million years. There was no moon. Most, if not all, of Montana was under a shallow tropical sea. The continents hadn't separated. You're going to drown and forty-foot long crocodiles will eat your carcasses."

"We know what we're doing," she said abruptly.

"Monica," I pleaded, "Miss Dodd, I submit that you haven't the vaguest idea

what you are about to do. Jumping back and forth in time, so far back, even with these Shifters, will be pushing the limits of technology to say nothing of the limits to the human psyche. I can't believe that, even twenty years from now, the technology will be good enough to do it without errors or without the risk of injury or death."

She stood with her fists clenched on her hips and glared at me. "You've jumped both ways in the past couple of weeks and you're okay. I don't see any... ."

"Monica, shifting forward a day or two or an hour or two isn't the same as shifting back sixty-five million years to a place where there were no people to even measure time. What if time isn't the same thing there as here? What if, because no humans have looked upon that world, that it will be so alien that we cannot exist there?"

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning, what if the cosmic mind sees our encroachment into that world as a nightmare and wakes up, or something."

"Cosmic mind? Are you talking about God? Do you think this is all a dream in the mind of some cosmic dreamer?"

"That doesn't seem any more preposterous than our being here on this planet at this time in this space."

ONE

Two things happened in San Diego on the third day of July, 2003 that changed my life forever and may have changed the entire world in unknowable and unimaginable ways.

The first was when a man suddenly appeared at a self-storage facility in clear view of five witnesses, walked a few feet and dropped dead. While the witnesses all vehemently asserted that the man had literally appeared from the ether, the police had dismissed it as unreliable observation and set to the task of determining how and why the man had dropped dead in a broad, open parking lot.

The second was when I received a telephone call from the manager of the same storage facility stating that an account contracted in the name of Richard Constable was in arrears and that if I didn't bring it up to date, they would sell my property to the highest bidder.

Although I spent nearly two minutes trying to convince the caller I had no space at his facility and that I had not been paying for it since 1985 as he claimed, I was, in the end, curious enough to drive the mile to see what he was talking about.

And that's when I learned of the first incident.

The police barrier was strung up right next to the garage I was alleged to have rented seventeen years earlier. The coroner was examining the corpse and, as I walked past, I could not resist looking over his shoulder.

I was stunned witless.

The man laying dead ten feet away was someone I had met seventeen years earlier when he and several other people installed a Cascade Generator into a space ship and disappeared in the general direction of a planet they thought they would find six light years away.

It was Judson Templeton.

I am a firm believer that there are no such things in this cosmos as "coincidences." If two or three things happen at the same time or near the same time, in the same place, or places removed from one another, and if they impact upon the same person or persons, then it is not coincidence; it is, or they are, a linear event.

They mean something. And they mean something so important that at least one of the persons should apply his or her attention as quickly as possible.

I shook myself from my stupor and followed the manager to garage number seventeen. I had no key so he used his. The overhead door creaked open and we saw, standing in the center of the rather large cubicle, a wooden crate about the size of a telephone booth. That and nothing else.

"Who paid for this?" I asked, looking outside to see if I had imagined what I had seen. No, it was Judson Templeton.

"Check came every month from a bank in Europe."

"No name?"

"Name of the bank officer."

"How much is the rent?" I asked.

"I believe you owe about two hundred, forty-seven bucks."

"No, I mean how much per month?"

"Two hundred, forty-seven bucks."

For seventeen years, a bank in Europe had been sending two hundred, forty-seven dollars to this storage facility to pay the rent for a box the size of a telephone booth. I wondered what it contained.

"Only one way to find out," said the manager, "is to open it."

"Yes."

I walked around the box. On the far side someone had scrawled with an ink marker the words: July 3rd, 2003, and beneath that, the initials J. T.

Judson Templeton?

"So, do you want to open it? I can get a pry bar."

"No," said I. "Probably should take it home and look at it there."

"Suit yourself."

"I'll have someone pick it up in an hour or so."

"It'll cost you two hundred, forty-seven dollars."

He locked the garage and I followed him back to the office, noting that Judson Templeton had been loaded into an ambulance and was about to be taken away. I couldn't imagine what the coroner would think when he discovered the man he was inspecting had disappeared so many years before.

As we entered the office, a man standing on the customer side of the counter glanced at us briefly, then walked to wait near the door until the manager and I completed our business. As I passed him and stepped out into the sunlight, the man looked away, rather like he didn't want me to clearly see his face.

* * * *

The moving company I called promised to deliver the crate in an hour, so I went outside and moved my car to make room for it. Whatever it was clearly would not have fit through any doorway I had although it might after I freed it from the crate. After I moved the car, I went inside and prepared a pot of coffee.

July third, 2003. Judson Templeton appears from thin air outside a garage rented in my name.

July third, 2003. I receive a telephone call from the same facility to come over and take care of a delinquent account.

July third, 2003. Judson Templeton lays dead near the garage rented in my name.

Same date. The words July 3rd, 2003 JT are scrawled on the side of a crate inside the locked garage rented in my name.

The space rented in my name is number seventeen.

I watched Templeton and his colleagues depart planet Earth seventeen years earlier.

I knew Judson Templeton. He knew me. He appeared outside the garage rented in my name. Not at Future Industries of America where he once worked. Not at the offices of the F.B.I. Not at his former home in La Jolla, California. Outside the garage rented in my name. Twenty feet from a wooden crate bearing his message and initials.

Is there anyone out there who thinks these things constitute a mere coincidence?

While I was in the driveway directing the placement of the carton, I could hear the telephone ringing but before I could get inside to answer it, whoever it was hung up.

I paid the moving guys. "How much do you think it weighs?" I asked.

"On the manifest," one of them replied.

I looked. Four hundred twenty-two pounds.

"Ah, no wonder it cost so much."

"Whatever." They climbed into their truck and drove away, leaving me with the crate and about four hundred and twenty-two questions.

The most pressing question was, how did Judson Templeton, who was aboard a space ship which departed Earth in 1985 bound for some unknown star system, suddenly appear back on Earth seventeen years later; dead, to boot?

Some medical examiner was about to have a very strange experience when he discovered or was told by the F.B.I. that Judson Templeton, by all rights, should not even exist on this planet.

I poured a cup of coffee and thought about that. Maybe Templeton hadn't got aboard the space ship. Maybe he had been in San Diego all along and just kept out of sight.

But that didn't make any sense. Some of the agents who worked for the Department of Intelligence and Counter Espionage would have told me or mentioned it at least once in the ensuing seventeen years. All those guys are retired now. If I knew how to contact one of them, I'd call and find out if they knew anything about Templeton.

I didn't have to. While I was pouring a second cup of coffee, the telephone rang again. It was Steve Dansforth.

"Richard. Steve Dansforth. How are you?"

"Hey," said I. "Long time no see. Where are you?"

"Right here in San Diego."

"You live in San Diego?" I asked.

"Owl's Head, Maine. I'm here as a consultant for an investigation."

"I thought you were retired."

"I am but you know how it goes. D.I.C.E. needs my input on something that began several years ago. You remember Judson Templeton?"

"Oh, oh," I mumbled.

"What?"

"He's dead. This morning. About a mile from here."

There was a long silence on the other end of the line. "How do you know that?"

"Well, Steve, I happened to be at the storage facility where they found his body and I saw him."

"Umm, humm. Did you notice anything unusual about him?"

"Yeah," said I. "He hasn't aged a day since we last saw him in nineteen eighty-five."

"Unusual, yes?"

I didn't answer. I was thinking about the four hundred pound box in my driveway with Templeton's message on it. I wondered if I should tell Steve about it.

"You there?" he asked.

"Yeah, I'm here. I was thinking about... something. About Templeton. How do you suppose he got here? Did I miss something seventeen years ago?"

"No," he said cautiously. "He was on the ship alright. And it hasn't come back, at least not that we know. I've been checking around. NORAD didn't report it entering our space so the ship didn't come back."

"Okay," I said, "then how did Templeton manage to drop dead on the pavement outside my... outside that garage."

"Outside your?" he asked.

"Well, okay. Someone rented a garage there in my name. About twenty feet from where Templeton keeled over."

"Really?"

"Really."

Another long silence on the other end. Presently, he spoke again.

"Okay if I drop by to talk?"

"About what?"

"About Templeton."

"Oh, come on, Steve," I grumbled. "I don't know anything about Templeton. He was laying on the driveway outside the storage garage. That's all I know."

"And you're not even mildly curious about that?'

"Nope."

"B.S. Don't leave. I'm coming over."

So, that's why I'm in the driveway now trying to camouflage the telephone booth. It isn't that I don't want Dansforth to know I have it; I just want to know what someone paid for in my name for seventeen years. The bank in Europe paid over fifty thousand dollars to store the crate. I wanted to know why.

What's wrong with that?

TWO

"Where's your car?" Dansforth asked, exiting his sedan and looking around my driveway.

"Nice to see you, too, Steve. The years have been good to you. Yes, I'm fine. Thanks for asking."

"Where's your car?" he asked again.

"I don't have a car. Quit driving two or three years ago. How did you know where to find me?"

"I think it's a nineteen eight-six Dodge Lancer, probably the last one in the world. I found you by looking in the computer."

I tried to steer him into the house, but he directed his attention to the big blue plastic cover I had draped over the crate.

"Whatcha got there?" he asked.

"An old wooden telephone kiosk," I lied.

"Really?"

"Really."

"Mind if I have a look?"

"Yes, I do mind."

He pulled back the cover and inspected the crate, saw the words someone had scrawled on the side.

"Okay," he said. "Now we can go inside."

I walked in behind him and asked if he wanted coffee. While I was fixing it he sat in my favorite chair and began rocking gently back and forth.

I gave him his coffee. Cream and one sugar, just the way I remembered from ten years earlier.

"So," he said.

"So?"

"Tell me what's in the crate you're trying to hide in the driveway."

"Looks like a telephone booth to me. About the right size and shape, don't you think?"

"Make a guess," he said.

I told him it looked like a telephone booth or refrigerator; something like that.

He shook his head and smiled. "You don't know?"

"Don't know what?"

"Richard, do you think Judson Templeton would write on the side of a telephone booth the date that he would appear in San Diego after having been gone for seventeen years? May I use your telephone?"

I might have said no, but he had already dialed a number. He spoke briefly, told someone where he was, told them about the crate in the driveway, nodded, and hung up.

Right to the point, was Dansforth.

"You sending someone along to steal my telephone booth?" I asked.

"It isn't a telephone booth and it certainly isn't yours."

"In my name."

"Meaningless. Are you curious enough to ask what it is?"

I was. He told me and I wished he hadn't. But what he said explained how Judson Templeton had managed to appear out of thin air at the storage facility.

"It's a time machine of some sort," Dansforth said. "More likely a matter transporter. Or a combination of both. Maybe one does the other automatically."

I spilled my coffee.

"We've known about this since nineteen eighty-five but couldn't figure out where they hid the damned thing," Dansforth continued. "It never occurred to me that they would have entrusted it to you. But it figures."

"Why?"

"Hide it in plain sight," he said. "Better mop up your coffee."

I sponged myself with a paper towel. "I don't believe you, Steve. There's no such thing as a time machine or a matter transporter."

"Until now."

I appraised him carefully and decided he was telling the truth. A time machine? Where had it come from? Who had made it? I asked him.

"Your chum, Bentley, and Templeton's team, I imagine. They obviously constructed it at the same time they were perfecting the Cascade Generator. I believe they use the same basic technology." He smiled rather confidently.

"Let's go have a look," said I.

"Not a chance. Future Industries is coming to take it to their lab so they can examine it."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why are they going to examine it?"

"To see if they can back-engineer it so they can duplicate it, I imagine."

"They want to back-engineer a time machine so they can make more? Have you asked yourself why they might want to do that?" I refilled my cup and went to stand at the window so I could see who was coming to take the crate. Presently I asked the question that had been so pressing.

"How did Templeton appear outside that storage garage and what killed him?"

"We'll find out when we examine the machine and get the autopsy report."

He finished his coffee and took the cup to the kitchen sink, then he came over to stand beside me at the window.

"You seem unusually reflective just now, Richard," he said. "What's bothering you?"

"Thinking about a time machine. Seems like a terrible thing to have in one's possession. It seems especially terrible for a company with so many government contracts. If someone could alter time, alter events or something... well, it seems ominous somehow."

"I suspect it isn't that kind of time machine. It is more a device that moves things and people through space and time. I don't think it can be set to project someone to a specific date and place like the morning the atomic bomb was first tested."

I thought about the words on the side of the crate. Judson Templeton seemed convinced he was going to appear at a specific time and place when he did whatever he did to get from elsewhen to San Diego, California a few hours ago. Okay, he didn't make it alive. Or maybe he did, then died shortly after arriving, but he pinpointed his arrival pretty close to the time and place he thought he was dialing into the machine. Seems like he knew he could go where he wanted to go when he wanted to get there. But I kept my thoughts to myself. Dansforth would only dismiss my ideas with some canny explanation.

A large truck pulled up at the curb and Dansforth went out to move his car out of the way so they could back into my driveway. While he was doing that, an attractive lady walked right in and introduced herself.

Monica Dodd. D.I.C.E. SAIC. Special Agent in Charge.

When I was still a kid, Monica Dodd would be what everyone called a tomato, a knockout, the cat's pajamas, a doll, a dish, the real McCoy. Now, I think the kids call them babes, or chicks, or something like that.

Red hair, green eyes, perfect skin, about five-eight, maybe one hundred and ten pounds, twenty-six or twenty-eight years old, with lips that looked like they came off a television commercial. All the right stuff in all the right places. She could have been a film star. I liked her right away.

She told me they were taking the crate and had me sign some papers which would prove I agreed to let them have it. I wanted to ask her what would they do if I refused, but I suspected she would just have shot me or something. She was

packing a Walther P-38, for crying out loud. That's a lot of iron for such a small girl. She may have had a Sig Saur P-238 in the designer handbag over her shoulder, but the P-38 on her hip was proof enough that she was as dangerous as a rusty nail. So I signed the papers and they took my time machine away in their big truck.

Dansforth returned after watching the truck round the corner at the end of the block.

"On it's way," said I.

"Yes. Want to come down later and see what we have?"

I was surprised that he offered and I quickly accepted. He promised to call, shook my hand and left.

Well, that's that, I thought. I walked around the block to get my car and found that it was being closely examined by the man who had been in the storage facility office this morning when I had paid the account.

Pay attention.

If you see the same car behind you twice in the same day in a city the size of San Diego, that is not a coincidence. If you see the same person twice in the same day, especially if that person appears to have an extraordinary interest in you or your affairs, that is not a coincidence.

This guy was here examining my car because he was somehow associated with the Judson Templeton event.

He grimaced. "Caught me," he said.

"Yep. What do you want?"

"I'm Raymond Templeton," he said, offering me his hand.

"Okay, Raymond. What do you want?"

He was Judson Templeton's son. That caught me off guard because he actually looked older than his father. I asked him to prove it and he showed me some identification. He wanted to talk about his father and the machine he called The Accelerator so I drove him back around the block to the house.

He gave up drinking coffee a couple of years ago on the advice of his doctor, so right away I decided he wasn't my kind of person. Anyone who would let another person talk them out of a cup of coffee wasn't very shrewd, to my way of thinking.

Cigarettes, fine. Alcohol, great. But coffee? I don't think so.

Raymond Templeton talked fast and I had to keep asking him to repeat himself. He told me all about The Accelerator, the time machine, the matter transporter that his father and Roger Bentley had constructed while they were working on the Cascade Generator project almost twenty years before.

"They realized right away that they were the same technology," he explained. "The Generator actually changed time and space to propel a missile. Actually, it created a negative gravity field in the direction the missile was sup-

posed to go; it became a sort of vortex glider by creating its own vortex. It would always fall toward the negative field. So they knew they could use it to move things, people and machines, from one point in space time to another through the Quantum Field.

"But it was slow and sometimes it failed. Failed more often than not, in fact. They didn't have time to finish it, to get it right before they left, so they wanted to hide it somewhere, thinking that they could come back through the field to fix it so it would work properly."

"And this failure of the vortex; is that why he died?" I asked.

"No. The plan was to have the crate moved from the storage facility weeks sooner than it was. It was supposed to be at your house. No one imagined that the manager would wait a full month before calling you to inform you about the late account. Dad was supposed to appear at your house after you opened the crate."

"Your dad came back, then, not knowing he would materialize through a wooden box?"

"He did." Raymond sagged in the chair and managed a weak smile. "But he told me all about the Accelerator seventeen years ago and promised that if or when he made it back he would bring instructions with him, plans or blueprints, so someone could help him modify it. They wanted to be able to jump back and forth between their world and Earth."

I put a finger to my lips and thought about it. Jump back and forth? So they had made it to another planet. I wondered how long it had taken them. And I wondered if anyone had found the blueprints he had brought with him. I hadn't seen anything like blueprints or documents on the pavement beside him, but he may have dropped them somewhere before he died.

"Look," I said. "I'm sorry about your father. His dying, I mean. I was right there while they were recovering his body. I knew him, but only slightly, from years ago, before they left."

"I know. He and Roger would often talk about how they could leave the Accelerator in your care when they left. I was only twenty years old then."

"Why didn't you go with them? It must have been rather traumatic knowing both your parents were... ."

"Oh, Beth wasn't my mother. Judson and Andrea, my mother, were divorced three or four years before he met Beth. My mother still lives here in San Diego, so I'm not... well, alone, as it were. And I have my own family."

"Well, I'm sorry about your dad, just the same."

"Thanks. But I need to talk about something else, mister Constable."

"Richard. No one calls me mister Constable."

"Can you help me do something?"

"Like what?"

"I need to get a look at the Accelerator at Future Industries before they

have a chance to take it apart."

I started upright and peered at him over my glasses. "Raymond, I don't think that's going to be possible. Those people have more security guards than a large military base. I've been inside. They'll have no qualms about shooting anyone who tries to get close to that machine now that they have their hands on it."

He managed a sly little smile. "I'm not going to steal it; it won't work anyhow. I'm just going to look at the console when they initialize it. Some numbers will appear. Those numbers will be the coordinates to the planet where they landed some years ago."

"I don't understand," I said. "Why are the numbers important to you?"

"Because if they are erased or jumbled, the others will never be able to come back."

Thinking that I was talking to a madman, I decided to play along with his joke just in case he whipped out a pistol and began shooting up the place if he thought I didn't believe a word he was saying.

"Assuming they are still alive," I said.

"Oh, they are. My father was until this morning. But more importantly, I need the numbers to jump to them, to warn my father not to come back here."

"But, but... ."

"If I can do that, I will save his life, you see? He didn't need to come back because the problem has already been solved."

"But, but... ."

"I have been working to perfect their machine," he continued, still using the same breath of air, "and if I can get into the lab at Future Industries to retrieve, ah...something...I can go to warn him and be back before anyone notices that I even left."

"You can't just break in," I protested. "You'll be shot."

He nodded gravely. "I know. I once worked for them. But I must be there when they initialize the machine."

He looked at his hands folded in his lap for a few seconds, pursed his lips and fixed me carefully with his sad eyes.

"My dad and Roger Bentley were certain they could trust you with the time machine," he said presently. "And I believe I'll have to trust you as well. If I tell you about the time machine, if I show you something, may I have you word of honor that you will never disclose it to anyone until I have taken care of my business?"

"Sure," I said, wondering what he might tell me that required so much secrecy and honor.

He flipped open his briefcase and withdrew a black plastic device that appeared to be a laptop computer.

"This," he said firmly, "is the time machine. The real time machine."

"But, but... ."

"The one Future Industries took from your driveway an hour ago was twenty-year-old technology. It was obsolete before it was built. Can you imagine dragging around something the size of a telephone booth and spending hours trying to get it to initialize just so you could die trying to jump sideways in time?"

"But, but... ."

"This." He held it up and turned it in the light. "This is the culmination of seventeen years of research, Richard. This will do what the prototype could not. This works every time. I know because I have used it several times to jump short distances."

"I don't... ."

"It can work instantly or it can work in a delay mode. I mean, I can set it to perform a function and lay it aside. When the time arrives for the function, it does exactly as it was programmed."

He looked at his watch. I eyed him with growing alarm.

"In a couple of... ."

Poong.

A static charge made the hair on my arms bristle and Raymond Templeton vanished.

I spilled my coffee.

I stood and backed out of the room, watching the vacant spot on the chair with considerable apprehension.

Poong.

The same static charge made the same two things happen. Bristling hair and Raymond Templeton.

I spilled the rest of my coffee as I backed into the hallway door jamb.

He looked at me with amused satisfaction. "You see," said he, "I programmed it while you were pouring your coffee. You seem to have spilled it."

I stood in the doorway and sponged myself with a paper towel. "You are going to get killed," I said.

"Actually, its quite safe."

"I don't mean that. I mean if someone knows you have that thing, you are going to be killed. Do you realize how many people... ."

"Ah, yes," he said. "And that is why I must have your word that you will guard this secret with your life."

I held up my hands like a traffic cop. "Wait a minute, Raymond," I protested. "You can't hang this on me; it isn't fair. Just take it out of here and I'll forget we ever met."

"Not possible. Perhaps I should explain."

"That'd be nice."

"The secret component to making the time machine work properly is the

Steinmetz Accelerator. The original Accelerator was the size and shape of a galvanized trash can. Mine is the size of a wrist watch battery.

"The original prototype time machine that Roger and my father built was a large, unwieldy thing...well, the thing they took from your driveway this morning. It required large disks...vortex conductors... in order to initiate a transfer. Am I going too fast?"

"Of course, but continue."

The prototype was extremely inefficient, he explained, and it failed more often than it was successful. The first problem—and they had recognized it early on—was the rapid decay of the electromagnetic pulse from the Cascade Generator. The second problem was the vortex conductors, the disks. They could not accumulate and stabilize the electromagnetic pulse from the Cascade Generator for more than a few seconds. Judson's theory was that if they could somehow manage to prolong the pulse at a constant rate, they could prevent the frequent failures.

"But that wasn't the solution," Raymond said. "The solution was to accelerate the pulse beyond the speed of light so that the transfer could occur instantly rather than minutes or days."

"But, I thought light... ."

"...travels at a constant speed of one hundred, eighty-six thousand miles per second. That's what Einstein proposed. But Aaron Steinmetz proved him wrong and he demonstrated that he could accelerate light by a factor of three hundred when he invented this." He held up the time machine.

"My God," I said. "What happens to the human body at that speed?"

"Oh, you wouldn't go anywhere. There is no "someplace" to go. The time and space of your destination is the same time and space of your departure. They overlap, as it were, one and the same. When the Accelerator is activated, it is like stepping over a line in the sand. First you are here and then you are there."

"Except you don't move."

"No, you don't move."

"Roger Bentley and the others are right here." I waved my hands around me.

"When the Accelerator is properly activated, yes."

"No corridors, no tunnels, no portals or passageways?"

"None of those."

I let that sink in, brushed the thought away and stared at the little device in his hand. A time machine, I thought. A flaming time machine! No one should have a machine that will allow humans to move back and forth through time. It is obscene. It was a frightening thought and I was frightened by it.

"The twelve disks," Raymond said, "are the key to the function of the prototype, as haphazard as it might be. The people at Future Industries will soon dis-

cover what they are for. They must not be allowed to use them.''

''I have a question.''

''Yes?''

''Okay, this morning I had a moving company deliver a crate... .''

''I saw them do it.''

''Right. They told me it weighed over four hundred pounds. They charged me for four hundred pounds.''

''Yes,'' Raymond said.

''How in the world did you get something the size of an upright freezer into that little thing?''

He explained as briefly as he could that he had been working on his own time machine ever since his father had gone away seventeen years earlier. He had realized very quickly that the original device was seriously flawed, that the Cascade Generator alone could not provide an adequate pulse for a long distance transfer, and that some kind of accelerating pulse would be needed to prevent failures.

''People were lost,'' he said. ''Things went in and never came out. They didn't know how to mend it and hadn't time before they left to devise a method to make it work properly.

''But my dad had told me enough about it, and I was so fascinated with the idea, that I determined to correct its flaws and invent a time machine that really works. I've done it.''

''You sound certain of it.''

''You saw the proof.''

''So why are you concerned about the other machine? If these disks are required to make it work and if you can get your hands on them, why not just throw them away and... .''

''No! We can't do that. The machine they took with them, Roger and the others, uses the old technology. My dad came back using one of the disks. We'll have to use at least one of the disks to send one of these new Accelerators to them.''

I was actually wringing my hands. ''But, Raymond, how could you miniaturize something that big into something this small? How does it know what to send? How can it discriminate between a person and everything that surrounds him or her?''

''Our technology is literally exploding, Richard. If I had to hazard a guess, I'd be tempted to say alien technology has been revealed to us.''

''Alien? Alien? You mean... ?''

He nodded and pointed toward the ceiling.

''My God!'' I cried.

''Yes.''

''Well, I'll be interested to see what the engineers have to say about it dur-

ing the demonstration''

''What demonstration?''

''I've been invited to some kind of presentation they're having next Monday or Tuesday.''

''I didn't know. Excuse me, I have to do something before I leave.'' He flipped the tiny machine open and turned it on. I could see that the top half was a liquid crystal screen and the bottom was a minature keyboard, but with eight rows of keys. It looked like a small laptop computer or a pocket computer. He typed a long series of numbers, scrolled back through them to make certain they were correct, then turned the machine off.

''For later,'' he said. ''I'm going to leave some instructions for you so you can learn to operate this machine. I wrote them in simple English. There is nothing technical about them. You'll know how to turn on the computer, how to turn it off, how to power up the Accelerator and how to use the keyboard to make destination entries.''

''I don't want to learn it,'' I said.

''Why, of course you do. Number one, you'll have to help me for a few days until I get things settled here. Number two, I will need you to stay on this side to receive the jumpers when they begin coming through. We can't have them appearing at some inopportune moment at a storage facility, you see.''

''They'll be coming here? To my house?'' I was incredulous.

''Sure,'' he said. ''Unless I can manage to save my father and warn the others not to jump back. Why not?''

''Why not? Why not? Because I'm not ready... I can't imagine... I don't believe... .''

''Number three. I need you to protect the time machine until I can get the numbers from the prototype console when they initialize it. Those numbers are important to me, to Roger and the others, and they will be increasingly important to you.''

''Why me?''

''You'll probably want to use them to escape in the next few weeks, believe me.''

''Escape?''

''From whomever comes looking for this Accelerator.''

''Oh, great. Thanks a lot.''

''There's my briefcase,'' he said, pointing to it. ''Please read the notes I made and the other instructions before you initialize the Accelerator. But, in case I do not return, do nothing at the keyboard until Wednesday midnight.''

''Why might you not return?''

''I've made some entries to program the Accelerator to perform certain functions beginning in a few minutes until Wednesday midnight. If you use the key-

board with the Accelerator powered up, you will nullify or scramble the codes I set. It could be fatal.'' He looked at his watch. ''Actually, I have to go now. I'll be back in a day or two and we'll go over what you've learned at that time.''

''I wish you hadn't done this to me, Raymond. My life was very simple until this morning. Now I think it will never be the same again.''

He nodded gravely. ''My dad and Roger were... are...depending on you to set up the time machine so they can come back, if necessary. I am, in fact, going to leave this in your care permanently. Please do not turn it on, do not touch the keys or try to program it. I'll be back in a day or two. When did you say Future Industries was going to let you see the machine?''

''Monday or Tuesday.''

''I'll be back, at the latest, by Wednesday morning, then. If my mission is successful, I will delete the remaining codes. If you do not see me before Wednesday midnight, the machine will perform all its functions and run out the codes at midnight Wednesday.''

''Another question.''

''Yes?''

''How many of these things do you have? I mean, if I keep this one, there must be another one or how could you send people back and forth?''

''Two.'' He handed me the time machine and left without another word.

I watched him walk away and thought perhaps I had gone mad. Time machines. Matter Transporters. Nonsense. It was a trick of mirrors, some kind of mind control. The Russians are behind all this madness, I thought.

While I was getting ready for bed I listened to some weather man on one of the local channels. He predicted that a string of storms would move from the northwest coast of Africa and cross the Atlantic to wreak havoc upon the east and Gulf coasts of America. He explained something about a huge solar coronal ejection that had been detected earlier in the day and that they were caused by massive electromagnetic disturbances in the solar system. Comets or asteroids, planetary alignments or the appearance in our solar system of large objects from the Oort Cloud, including objects the size of moons or small planets, he said.

Or non-linear events, I thought; massive electromagnetic pulses from time machines, maybe.

THREE

The next day, Saturday, Steve Dansforth and Monica Dodd interrupted my first cup of coffee by pounding on my front door. I let them in, fixed coffee for them, then sat with my arms folded across my chest until they decided to tell me why they had once again intruded into my life. Presently, Monica Dodd opened a small folder and slid a picture across the coffee table to me.

''Do you know who this is?'' she asked.

"Raymond Templeton," said I.

"How do you know him?"

"I caught him sniffing around my car the day you stole my telephone booth. I got his license number and checked," I lied. "If he comes around again, I'll kick his butt."

"I doubt that you'll be seeing him again," Dansforth said.

Oh, oh, I thought, they've apprehended him and he'll tell everyone about the time machine and I'll spend the rest of my miserable life in a federal prison.

"He's missing," Monica said. "We suspect he's dead."

"What makes you think he's gone missing?"

"His wife has filed a missing persons report. She has not seen him for nearly a week."

That changed everything. If they find out I've been palsy walsy with Raymond and that he had a time machine and they find it in my desk drawer, it might be an easy task for some canny prosecutor to convince a jury that I killed him for it.

"Son of a gun," I said, hoping Raymond was just very adept at hiding.

"It gets even more curious," Dansforth added. "Until about a year ago, he was working for Future Industries trying to develop, of all things, a time machine similar to the one his father made seventeen years ago."

"He and the chief engineer, the project manager, had a serious falling out over technology," Monica added. "Raymond insisted that he could solve some of the machine's inherent faults, but the project manager was committed to building the machine according to the blueprint.

"It requires some sort of energy plates to initiate a transfer but no one has been able to figure out how they work, how they were constructed or where they fit within the machine."

All that fairly well explained how Raymond knew so much about the prototype time machine and why he was determined to get the vortex conductors before the engineers at Future Industries could determine how to use them.

And it sounded to me like Dansforth and Monica meant that the engineers had uncrated the machine and either had not found the disks or had found them but could not determine how they were used to initiate a transfer. Did that mean some portion of the blueprints or instructions were missing? I asked Monica.

"They are missing," she nodded. "It appears that the pages were literally ripped from the manual. And recently, too. Maybe within the past day or two."

"And that," said Dansforth, "is why we are here. We could find no impressions on the crate that it had been opened before we took it away. We examined it very closely, believe me."

He worked his fingers into five little steeples and fixed me with his deep blue eyes. "I just want to hear from your own mouth that you did not open the crate, Richard."

"I didn't have time to open it."

"Say you didn't open it."

"I didn't open it."

Dansforth eyed me suspiciously. "Would you agree to a polygraph examination?" he asked.

"No," I said. "I will not."

Monica Dood's leaned toward me. "Why not, mister Constable?"

"Because there is not one decent polygraphist in a thousand who is competent enough to ask the proper questions, that's why."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, they ask questions designed to prove the interviewee is guilty, to prove the detective's case."

"I think not," Monica said.

"Yes they do," I said. "And I'll give you some examples. I'll be the polygraphist and you are the interviewee. Someone has stolen something from the evidence room where you work. You were in the room a few days prior to the discovery of the theft, so you are a suspect. I ask your name and if you live at a certain address, then I ask you this question: Have you ever stolen anything from the evidence room with a value of five hundred dollars or more? You want to answer 'no,' but if you do, it means you have stolen something from the evidence room that has a value of five hundred dollars or *less*. No matter how you answer the question, you are guilty, see?"

"No one would ask a question like that," she insisted.

"Of course they do. I was asked a similar question during a polygraph exam. That and others that were even worse. All were designed to prove I was guilty of a crime the military could not solve. They needed a goat to cover their lack of security of classified documents and they wanted to pin it on me. When they realized I was smarter than the polygraphist, they changed the questions designed specifically to incriminate me. No matter how I answered the questions, I would have been considered guilty of some kind of complicity in the disappearance of those documents. They couldn't connect me to the theft so they wanted to boot me out of the military."

"How did you answer?"

"I didn't. I removed the wires and walked out. If I had been carrying a weapon, they could have arrested me for murder. The polygraphist knew it, too. I scared the shit out of him. They left me alone after that."

Dansforth exhaled loudly. "Okay, I believe you," he said, looking at Monica for a second opinion. She nodded agreement reluctantly.

"Now I have a question, if you don't mind," I said to Monica.

"Go ahead."

"Not two hours after I picked up that machine, Dansforth called me. You,

obviously, were already on the job. Both of you knew about this long before I did and I want to know how you found out I had the crate delivered to my house."

"We received a call from the storage facility," Monica said.

Well, I knew the manager wouldn't call to tell a federal agency that someone had paid for a storage cell and had a crate delivered to his home. What reason would he have for it? Someone else called and I was betting it was Raymond Templeton. But, then, why would he have me surrounded by federal agents before he had a chance to retrieve the vortex conductors and the instructions?

"Ah," I said.

"Something?" Dansforth asked.

I was almost tempted to tell them if they could find Raymond Templeton, they would most likely find the missing pages of the instructions. I wondered how he had managed to reach into the crate and tear out the pages without opening the box.

"Nothing. An anonymous tip, then, is what sent you here?"

"More or less," Monica said.

I sipped my coffee and thought about Raymond. I didn't believe he was lost or dead; I thought he was jumping back and forth in time to do whatever he thought he had to do to save his father's life and to prevent the engineers at Future Industries from operating the prototype time machine. But things must be thumping at the plant to get Monica Dodd out and on the job on a weekend. I wondered what it was.

"Well, actually," she explained, "we came to tell you that the engineers are going to let us have a look at their machine Monday afternoon. Would you like for me to pick you up?"

"Of course. What time?"

"I'll let you know. I'll call first." With that, she rose and headed for the door, leaving Dansforth and me alone. He screwed up his mouth and asked if I had heard from Brandy.

"Not for a couple of years, Steve. She called me when her dad passed away. It really isn't any of your business."

"Okay, tough guy. I just thought you might get back together."

"She won't. Those years were too hard, and I don't blame her."

"Well, a lot of it was our fault, so... ."

"That's it. No more." I stood as a signal it was time for him to leave as well.

I made certain they had gone around the corner and went to the computer room where I sat with Raymond's time machine in my lap. Somehow, he had known his father was going to be returning to Earth at a certain time and place. He was there waiting. He had called all the right people to inform them that an event was about to occur, that Judson Templeton was going to reappear, and that I had paid for the crate and had it delivered to my house. It was the only explanation that

could have got all those people into my driveway so fast. They knew well before I did that all these events would transpire and that a time machine was in the box.

And Raymond had already told me that he had used his Accelerator to make short excursions in time. I suspected he was moving around, back and forth, to get the instructions, to observe events both past and future, and was probably at Future Industries at that very moment trying to find the vortex conductors, the disks that were the initiators, the start buttons without which, according to him, Judson's time machine at Future Industries could not function.

That's why he had all the smart investigators lurking around me. If they were here, they wouldn't see him sneak in to steal those disks.

In my lap lay the entire cosmos if Raymond was right. A planet on the far side of the Milky Way galaxy was only one-sixteenth of an inch from my face. Roger Bentley and the others were in my computer room, or soon would be if Raymond had his way in this matter.

There are three time machines in San Diego, California today. Future Industries has a four hundred pounder that doesn't work. I have one in my lap, and Raymond Templeton, wherever he is, has the third or knows where it can be found.

The one at Future Industries was left incomplete seventeen years ago, but the one in my lap was assembled perhaps only days before Raymond left it in my care.

It was a scary moment just then when I realized what I had. Because it was powered with a Cascade Generator the size of a shirt button, it was always on and would run without fluctuation until the sun went nova. It was always ready to transfer things, people and machines, from anywhere in the quantum field to anywhere else in the quantum field.

Raymond hadn't created a wormhole; he had created a portal through which all of humankind could journey to the farthest fields of time and space.

For a moment, the implications of the Accelerator drove me to depression, because I knew there were countless numbers of people who would use it as a weapon did they but know it existed. And I had no doubt, once Future Industries engineers demonstrated what they knew about the one in their lab, that the big secret would be out in a matter of days.

Oh, but I was so tempted to crush it, to burn and destroy it. At the same time I was so tempted to turn it on to see what galaxies whirled through my computer room.

In the end, I decided to use the remaining hours of the day reading the instructions and Raymond's notes. If Raymond's warning about escaping from those who might discover I had the time machine had any merit at all, I thought it might be a good idea to know how it worked.

As it turned out, it wasn't all that difficult to learn because Raymond had programmed tens of thousands of destinations into the tiny computer, the coordi-

nates of which he had taken from astronomy telescope computers. The computer would use the coordinates from the keystrokes to acquire a galaxy or planet or star, and then look for a suitable place to transfer whatever was within the range of the Accelerator's field. How it did all that I was not able to determine, but it apparently worked, at least for short distances or intervals, because I had watched Raymond disappear and then materialize again right in my computer room.

Unless the whole thing was some kind of magician's trick or hallucinatory event created by a mind control device, Raymond's little machine worked just fine. I realized that I could probably find a destination, select it, go to it and return quite as easily as I might step into a telephone booth, dial a number and reach the person on the other end of the line.

The remarkable feature of the Accelerator was that literally dozens or hundreds of destinations could be chosen for hundreds of different packages or persons and when the time came for those items to be transferred and if they were within the detection field, off they went. That was the feature Raymond had referred to as the delay mode.

Even more astounding was a feature that allowed a person or item to be transferred to a distant destination for any length of time; say a month, then return a fraction of a second after it was transferred. To a person standing in the same room, it would appear that the person or item never disappeared at all. A man, for instance, would not even have grown a beard in this reality although he may have had a month's growth of facial hair in the other.

It was, in more ways than I could even imagine, a rather clever and terrifying device, to understate it somewhat.

By evening, I was keen for Raymond to return so he and I could test my understanding of the time machine. Waiting another day or two was going to be unbearable and I began to hope that Raymond could complete his business early and return before I accompanied Monica Dodd to the presentation at Future Industries. I wanted to be able to compare Raymond's book-sized Accelerator with the four hundred pound monster at Future Industries.

I paced the floor as I read and reread the instructions and notes, referring to the keyboard, the switches and the small amber lens on the frame at the top of the screen. The lens formed an image of the person or item to be transferred, defined it by omitting the background clutter, then transferred the image to the screen and somehow connected it to the coordinates selected on the keyboard. Then the whole thing went *poong* and the transfer was accomplished.

The sound did not emanate from the machine; it sprang from the ether, the atmosphere surrounding the person or item as it vanished. I imagined that it was air rushing in to fill the vacuum left by the transferred object. I wondered what sound an aircraft carrier would make when it vanished.

While pacing and reading, I would stop to look out the window overlooking

the street and, during one stop, I saw a dark van parked under the trees. It didn't belong to anyone in the neighborhood, so I glanced out each time I passed the window to see if anything unusual was going on out there.

I went to the kitchen to prepare a light meal after five o'clock and when I returned the van was gone. It had been parked there for nearly eight hours and I wondered who was inside and what they were watching or hearing. Maybe it was a couple of agents from D.I.C.E. hoping to catch Raymond walking to my house. Or maybe they were hoping I would drive away to meet him somewhere so they could follow me.

Maybe I was getting paranoid.

Sunday was much the same as Saturday except the van did not reappear. But just before I went to bed, the hair on my neck and arms bristled and I heard a crackling sound from the computer room.

Raymond was busy moving a stack of lavender disks about the size of 33 rpm phonograph records from the floor to my computer table. They were, I suspected, the parts of Judson's time machine that made the transfers possible.

"I thought you said Wednesday," I said.

"Oh, hello, Richard," Raymond responded as if it were perfectly normal for him to be in my computer room at ten o'clock on a Sunday evening.

"These are the disks," he continued. "They'll never be able to make a transfer without these. And I got the coordinates, too, so I can jump back to tell my dad and the others not to come through. Have you been reading the instructions?"

"Several times," I said. "Did you know your wife has filed a missing person report?"

"Oh, god, I'll have to jump back and undo that as well. As if I didn't have enough to do right now. But how did you know that?"

"Monica Dodd."

"Ah, yes. Well, I can undo that easily enough but... ."

"Raymond," I interrupted, "how the hell can you undo something that has already happened? How can you go back to warn your dad not to come back when he has already come back? How can you unfile a missing person report?"

He smiled ruefully and spread his hands in a gesture of futility. "Richard," he said presently, "it is something called the paradox of time that makes it possible. I don't have time to explain it just now." He asked for the Accelerator and made a series of quick keystrokes.

"There," he said. "Everything is done and undone. You may use the Accelerator any time you wish now. But be careful. Make certain you always program in the return pathway or you will be left out there." He pointed to the ceiling.

"I'll be careful. But I may not try anything with the machine at all. I don't think I am as brave as you about jumping around in time. I would really like to know how you can go back to tell your dad not to come here when he has already

done it."

He was exasperated and began to wring his hands. "Time is not a concrete thing, Richard. It is not a thing at all. Time is an aspect, if you will, of space. And space is nothing but space. The universe is everything and nothing. It is ever present and at the same time nonexistent. The quantum field is nowhere and everywhere at the same time. It is inside us and outside us."

"And you can manipulate this quantum field to go anywhere in the universe."

"I can," he said.

"How? Do you warp space, bend the field? What?"

"Space can't be bent. Space itself has no properties. It is nothing. One can't bend nothing. I manipulate time by accessing the quantum field, by opening the door to the universe. I select a door, a pathway, and I open it. Once opened, I simply step though the doorway and I am where I want to be."

"That doesn't explain how you can undo an event that has already occurred," said I.

He gave me the Accelerator and grimaced. "I'm not explaining it very well. I could do better if I had more time." He looked at his watch. "I might explain the paradox, but I suspect you would not under... ."

Poong.

Well, Raymond Templeton was off again; this time to undo a missing person report and convince his wife that he had not been away for a week or so. I walked over to the desk and looked at the lavender energy disks laying there. I wondered how they worked. I wondered how they were constructed, where they were placed in relation to the machine, and most of all, I wondered why Raymond had left them with me rather than tossing them into a dumpster somewhere.

According to him, he had the coordinates so he could jump back to warn his dad. Maybe he already had. Why did he want to save the disks? But as I examined the disks, I realized there were only eleven of them. Raymond had said there were twelve. I wondered where number twelve was.

I began to worry that I was going to find the answers to most of those questions a lot sooner than I cared to. But until that time, it seemed logical if not wise, to turn on the Accelerator and find out how it worked.

There followed the most terrifying, amazing, delightful three minutes of my life. From that moment nothing would ever be the same. I found myself, in my pajamas, still in my computer room, surrounded by the entire endless expanse of the universe superimposed upon the walls, floor and ceiling of the room.

It was alive; a living creature as great, as wide, as broad as eternity. I could feel music flowing across the surface of my skin, could hear the colors of the electric celestial fires. I felt as if I were floating in a great black sea of living light where both this reality and the quantum reality were visible at the same time. As I focused on one, the others would dim. When I gazed at a star or cloud, it would

become pinpoint clear. I knew inside my head that if I reached out my hand I could touch them.

I tore my gaze away from the fields and looked at the crystal screen.

DESTINATION? it queried.

I managed to switch off the Accelerator before I collapsed upon the floor in a state of euphoric exhaustion. I was astounded to find, after looking at the screen, that slightly more than three minutes of quantum time had passed although the second hand of my desk clock was just then moving to the very next second from the moment I had turned on the Accelerator. Three minutes there, one second here. The Paradox.

Oh, Raymond, I thought wearily, what have you done?

FOUR

Monica Dodd called at 9:30 Monday morning to say she would pick me up and drive me to the demonstration at Future Industries, could I be ready by ten?

"I thought maybe Dansforth would pick me up," I said.

"He has returned to Maine," she said. "His business here is finished."

I'll bet, I thought; said instead, "I'll be ready."

* * * * *

Do I dare disturb the universe?
In a minute there is time
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.
For I have known them all already, known them all:—
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;
I know the voices dying with a dying fall
Beneath the music from a farther room.
So how should I presume?
And I have known the eyes already, known them all—
The Love Song of Alfred J. Prufrock; T. S Eliot

* * * * *

And I was ready, having washed the cups and saucers up and brushed the crumbs away, having combed my hair and cleaned my spectacles, having hidden anything that might connect me to Raymond Templeton should anyone contrive to prowl around my home while I was gone.

I was waiting on the walk when she arrived, opened the passenger door and sat. Monica smiled a disarming smile, waited until I was strapped in, then made her way to the 15 freeway and headed north toward Future Industries.

"I thought perhaps Dansforth would have wanted to hang around long enough to see this machine, " I said presently.

"Umm, he did, actually, but he had to attend to some business back home."

"Must have been important business." I wondered what could have been so important that he could not have postponed it until he witnessed Judson Templeton's amazing machine.

"I think so," Monica said, ending my query.

We talked about the time machine. I asked if she had seen it and she nodded solemnly. When I asked if she had observed it operate or do anything, she just smiled again and told me to wait until I saw it for myself.

After being identified by armed guards and pinned with passes, we were ushered into a large concrete room approximately one hundred feet square and forty feet high. There were no windows. An air circulating unit thrummed somewhere nearby. It was unusually cold. Thirty folding chairs had been set up in a semicircle and all but two were occupied. Obviously, we were late.

Four men, apparently the engineers who had been charged with determining how Judson's machine worked, were very busy fussing with knobs and switches on a console positioned some dozen feet from what appeared to be a large stainless steel water tank in the middle of the room.

I guessed the four hundred pound time machine was seven feet tall and about four feet in diameter. A series of evenly spaced gleaming metal globes lined the entire circumferences at the top and bottom of the cylinder. Except for the globes, the cylinder was perfectly smooth. There was no door or entrance of any kind that I could see.

Then my eyes fell upon twelve lavender disks stacked neatly beside the console. I was puzzled. Raymond had told me that he had taken the disks so they could not be used to effect a transfer. What were these?

The project manager welcomed us, explained briefly that he was going to power up the machine and send a clock back in time. Proof that it had transferred, he said, would be seen in the fact that the hands of the clock would not move until it reappeared. I knew all about that. He touched a button.

. . . ka-Tung.

The machine energized with a sound much like an old black and white television set with a faulty high power unit. The hair on everyone's arms bristled and some papers in plastic document preservers curled toward the time machine. I looked at Monica Dodd. Her hair was wavering away from her face and inclining toward the metal cylinder. Her eyes grew large with apprehension but she made no attempt to catch her hair.

The surface of the gleaming cylinder wavered, almost a liquid translucence, and flashes of electricity jumped from the globes at the top of the cylinder to those at the bottom, cycling up and down again and again. I feared someone might be electrocuted before the demonstration ended.

Standing well away from the moaning cylinder, the project manager instructed one of the other men to carry a lavender disk to a point about twenty feet

to the left of it. He held up the clock, showing us that the second hand was sweeping normally around the face. He placed the clock onto the disk so we could see that it was ticking away, the hand now creeping downward toward the number six.

"When it gets to twelve," he said, "I'll transfer it, and when it returns... ."

There was a sudden crackling in the room and a noticible increase in air pressure such as one might experience inside a 1970 Volkswagen if you slammed the doors with all the windows rolled up. For a very brief moment Monica's hair was drawn to the right in the direction of the console. Everyone looked, aware that something odd was occurring there. The pages of the instruction manual fanned open and some of them appeared to fly upward and vanish. A clattering sound to the left caused everyone look toward the clock which was sliding across the smooth concrete floor. The lavender disk vanished. I looked toward the other lavender disks in time to see them vanish as well.

Raymond Templeton, the invisible man, was here. And that explained how he had taken the pages from the instruction manual and had stolen the lavender disks. What I thought had happened yesterday or the day before was happening today before our very eyes. Raymond came forward a few hours, perhaps more than once, had taken all the things that would make the prototype function, then returned to real time at my house last evening.

The engineers did not hesitate for a moment to shut off the machine. They were completely baffled; thinking, I suppose, that they had somehow bungled their transfer attempt. They bustled around for a minute trying to take inventory, then hurriedly brushed everyone outside amid howls of grumbling and derisive laughter.

"Piece of junk," I said to myself, unaware that I was smiling. "It will never work."

Monica heard me and was indignant. "It will work," she said firmly, crushing the papers she was holding. "They'll make it work once they, once they... it isn't funny."

"It ain't gonna work, Monica," I said seriously. "Not now. Not ever. It's just a big piece of scrap metal."

And I knew that was true. Raymond had managed to manipulate time to completely disable his father's time machine. Future Industries might as well hire someone to haul it to the scrap yard.

Monica was both furious and crestfallen. She was beside herself, refusing to speak to me during the long drive home or to acknowledge my goodbye at the curb. I suspected her career and future promotions depended a great deal upon how well this assignment went for her, and I began to feel low class for dashing her hopes. I thought I might make it up to her later by showing her the real time machine. I'd take her for a trip to see the winning lottery numbers a week in the

future or something like that. I'd be her hero.

Any thoughts of such foolishness vanished a few moments later when Issac Court and David Griffiths, two veteran agents from DICE, knocked on the door and asked to come in.

"Like to ask you some questions," Court said laconically.

I learned a long time ago that when these birds decide they want to ask questions, it is a waste of time and energy to refuse. I nodded and waved them to chairs.

"I thought you two would be retired by now," I said. "Want coffee?" They declined, so I sat opposite them and raised my eyebrows a fraction of an inch, indicating that I was ready to answer their questions.

"Have you seen Raymond Templeton in the past two or three days?" Court asked.

"No," I lied.

"Do you know where he is?"

"Look," I protested, "I've already done this with Dansforth and Miss Dodd. What's the... ."

"Just answer the question," Court insisted.

"No, I don't know where he is."

Griffiths stood and began walking around the room, carefully examining everything in sight, looking for patterns in the dust, things that had been moved or rearranged recently, peeking behind the pictures on the wall, mentally cataloging and classifying. He made his way toward the computer room.

"Excuse me," said I indignantly, "I don't recall giving you permission to search the house."

Court waved him back to his chair. Griffiths smiled at me as he sat, knowing that my protest meant I probably had something to hide, something nearby I didn't want him to find; something that was in the computer room. They would return someday while I was busy elsewhere to search the house thoroughly. I knew I was going to have to hide the Accelerator where they couldn't find it.

"Did you take anything from the outside of the container you had delivered here last week?" Court continued.

"No."

"From inside?"

"No. Dansforth had it removed before I could open it. Why don't you talk to Monica Dodd or Dansforth."

"We have and we will again," Court said. "We're doing a follow-up."

"What? To see if my story has changed in the last three days? I haven't seen Templeton and I don't know where he is and I didn't take anything from the machine. Is that good enough?"

Court sat back in the chair and glared at me. "You seem a bit agitated, Con-

stable," he said. "Are you nervous about something? Got something on your mind?"

I did but it was not something I could repeat without getting arrested, so I stood and ended the questioning, sweeping my hand toward the door. They rose without protest and departed.

Things were going from bad to horrible. It wasn't enough that I had to contend with Raymond jumping back and forth in and out of my computer room, now I was going to have to live with Court and Griffiths knocking on my door or lurking outside in their big black van trying to listen to noises and conversations inside my house.

I retraced Griffiths' course around the living room and found a small transmitter he had cleverly placed under a picture. I knew the type; it was very sensitive and could pick up noises and conversations quite well, even from other rooms thirty or forty meters away.

Their visit was not to question me; it was made only to plant the listening device. I left it where it was, knowing if I removed it they would conclude that I really did have something to hide, in which case they would come back to plant another more cleverly hidden device, or haul me away, kicking and screaming to an interrogation room where they would eventually get the information they wanted. I'm too old to take a beating from people like Court or Griffiths. I'd cave in before the first hour was up.

And they knew it.

But there is a way out, isn't there? It is in the computer room. It is about the size of a large hardback book. I could turn it on, select a destination, and go back eighteen years to the life Brandy and I had before we met all these people, then throw the damned time machine into a lake somewhere. You have no idea how tempted I was to do it. I even went into the computer room and picked up the Accelerator, opened it and stared at the keyboard, imagining for long minutes how easy it would be once I became proficient at making it work.

In the end, however, I clicked it shut and put it away. It seemed the wrong way to solve all the problems I had brought upon myself by allowing myself to get involved with intrigue and deception. There is something to be said for running away from one's problems. Brandy had run away from me and it apparently had worked for her. I had run away from my own nightmares once before and I knew I could do it again once I had worked out what all the problems were. There seemed so many it was difficult to know where to begin.

But the greatest problem was not being able to escape the scrutiny of D.I.C.E. The agency had used me as an unwitting and unwilling courier during the Vietnam conflict to locate the positions of billions of dollars in counterfeit Federal Reserve Notes that had been stached in caves near the Cambodian border and along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. But I had left too many comrades there in the greening darkness with the leeches and the maggots. Left too many. And wished a thou-

sand times I had been one of them as I languished alone in hospital at Ton Son Nuht.

There, in the blackness of despair one evening, an anomalous shape, another me from a future time, reared itself before me in that smothering isolation cell as I cried out for a sign that my life was not wasted, that living was not a mockery, and said to me inside my head that everyone is responsible for his own soul and none other. That and nothing else, and vanished.

That and nothing else.

And when I despair these days, I am reminded of the older future me who appeared in that tiny confining room to admonish the younger me to care for my own soul to the exclusion of any other. How had I seen myself as an old man from a future time? How could I have dreamed it even in a fit of madness that I could appear as a wisp of smoke and speak inside my own head those words that would remain in my consciousness long after a million other more terrible images had faded away?

I had returned from Vietnam with an illness no one would validate. I could not sleep inside a house. I felt that I was being smothered again, and memories of the isolation room at Ton Son Nuht crashed upon me and ground me to dust. I could not sleep inside so I slept outside under a Mulberry tree on a board mounted upon two sawhorses. And I slept with a loaded, always ready, thirty caliber M1A-1 carbine.

Sick. Crazy. Deranged.

What did I think I was going to do out there under the Mulberry tree, alone in the darkness with my madness and a loaded carbine? Who or what was I waiting for? That went on for two years and I lost a family because of it. I longed for years to go back and change the events that began the insanity. Change the path we had taken, change the decisions we had made, change the choices of life and death that had been thrust upon us all there in the sweating jungle.

Now Raymond Templeton's little time machine had given me the opportunity to change everything did I but dare try it.

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.
What might have been is an abstraction
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation.
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.

Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose-garden. My words echo
Thus, in your mind.
But to what purpose
Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves
I do not know.
T. S. Eliot

But before I could change anything in my life, I had to know what needed to be changed. Would altering one thing alter all that followed? It was a paradox to be sure. I thought of the useless four hundred pound time machine in the laboratory at Future Industries. We had seen it. We saw the papers fly from the instruction manual. We saw the clock skitter across the floor when Raymond had kicked or threw it off the disk, and we saw, or thought we saw, the lavender disks vanish before our very eyes.

I had muttered something to myself or to Monica—which was it—and she had brought me home in silence. Or had we discussed the demonstration? Had it happened or had I imagined it?

To be sure, it was a paradox. Something that we thought had happened had not happened, or something that could not have happened had either happened, was happening as I thought of it, or would happen at a future time, or at least the evidence of it would manifest at some point in the future.

I paced the floor, then decided to make a half pot of coffee. I could think better with coffee inside me. I could work this out a little so I could arrange time to change things that needed to be changed. I knew I would never understand it, but I could make it work.

Coffee done, I poured a mugful and went into the computer room where I sat and opened the time machine. It was easy to operate. So easy that it was a bit scary. I had read the instructions a half dozen times. I could make it work. My fingers were curled above the keyboard.

A crackling of air startled me from my fantasy. Raymond Templeton wavered for a moment then appeared before me. If I had been holding my coffee cup, I would have spilled it.

"Damn, Raymond," I growled, "you are going to have to stop doing that. Can't you rig a horn or something on that thing to let people know you're coming?"

"Sorry, Richard. Ummm, I have been doing things elsewhere that needed attending to. One thing is this." He reached into a shoulder bag, withdrew what appeared to be a cell phone and gave it to me.

"Give me the other Accelerator," he said.

I gave it to him. He made a series of keystrokes, comparing them to calculations he made from the smaller, newer model. He nodded, smiled with satisfaction and handed it back to me.

"Other?" I said.

"Oh, yes. This is the new time machine. It functions nearly the same way but, as you can see, it is one fourth the size."

"How did you make this?"

"I didn't make it. Quantum-Tech Laboratories right here in San Diego made it. Actually they will make it in the year twenty twenty-five as a direct revision of the larger one there."

"I don't get it," I said, rubbing the stubble on my chin.

"Q-Tech will refine the technology of this..." He held out the book-size Accelerator... "to this." He held out the cellphone-size Accelerator. "A natural evolution of the technology."

"But how... .?

He went forward in time, he told me, to see if anyone continued development of the Accelerator, and in the year twenty twenty-five, which is as far as he had gone, he had found the model developed for the military that he had given me.

"But, twenty twenty-five," I mumbled. "How long have you been gone?"

"Only a few seconds from here, but twenty three years in the future over there."

I exhaled loudly and shook my head. Time jumping was going to take some getting used to.

"It is a lot less confusing when you do it yourself," Raymond said. "It all makes sense because you have made the changes, made the jumps. You know where you've been and where you're going."

Yeah, right, I thought, said instead, "Are there instructions with this thing?"

There were and he produced them, explaining that they were so nearly the same as those I had already read, that one would do for the other except for some very minor but important procedures. The differences had to do with military operations of attack and evasion, and the regeneration of events; the importance of which, he opined, would soon become apparent. I could learn them, he told me, in no time at all.

No time at all seemed the wrong thing to say just then.

"I have nearly completed all my tasks here," Raymond continued. "A few more alterations and I will leave this timeline permanently. I've decided I don't belong here anymore and I suspect you will decide the same thing not too many days from now. I've saved my father's life, this Accelerator will save yours, and soon I will save my own and those of my family."

"What do you mean you saved your father's life?" I asked.

"I saved my father's life," he said. "I went back to the day they left in the space ship and told him he didn't have to come back to warn us. That he didn't have to die."

I had no idea what he was talking about and told him so.

He smiled and nodded solemnly. His eyes were mysterious. A calmness hovered about him. And he nodded and nodded and smiled and smiled.

"Well," he said presently, "I must get on with my task of cleaning things up. It is likely that I will not see you again. When I am finished at home, I will jump directly to another timeline, into a different Earth time where I will find some comfort away from this madness." He waved his arms around the room.

I remembered the listening device under the picture in the next room and whispered a warning to him. He held up a finger.

"A moment," he said, tapping the keyboard of his own time machine. "I will not come to see you today, we will not have the conversation we just had and the listening device will hear, if anything at all, only the sound of your voice and your footsteps. I don't exist. Keep both Accelerators safe, Richard, particularly the larger one. You are going to need it in the days to come. And when you feel it is time to disappear from this timeline, use the older machine. No one can track your movements as with the newer one."

"But... ."

Click.

Poong.

* * * * *

I sat in the computer room. The large Accelerator was on the desk. In my lap was a tiny, cellphone-size time machine. Yes, I thought, a bit more reading and I'll have figured out how to use it, then I'd give it a try. I thought I might go back to Vietnam and try to change all the wrong things that had happened to me there.

I closed the instrument and put it into my pocket. It fit nicely. I slipped the larger machine into the top desk drawer. I tried to recall how I had got them, who had given them to me or where I had found them. Someone had been very clever to design them, especially this little one. I could carry it with me all the time.

All the time.

In the world.

FIVE

It was strangely quiet for a few days. The weather was miserably hot and humid and the sky was cloudless blue. Nights were sticky and unpleasant. I ran my fans and air conditioner twenty-fours every day. The telephone was silent. No one parked in front of the house. Raymond didn't come back. I spent several hours

at the end of the week trying to remember where I had met him and why he had seemed interested in my affairs. I could never figure it out.

But I was aware that I had somehow got my hands on something that was supposed to be a time machine, that I knew what it was and how to make it function properly, although I didn't know why or how I knew it. I remembered something about a demonstration at Future Industries and Monica Dodd. I wondered what had become of her.

I went to Vietnam.

*****

We had spent months lurking around the Ho Chi Minh Trail between the Mekong Delta and Lam Dong Province in Military Region Two, and we had found that most of the area was already infiltrated by large cadres of Viet Cong and some divisions of North Vietnamese Regulars. Our intelligence sorties had already convinced us that less than thirty percent of the supplies from North Vietnam were coming down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Most seemed to be coming overland from Cambodia but we were in no position at that time to trace those movements back to their source.

The most likely possibility was that most of the supplies were being shipped to a port in Cambodia, probably Sihounakville, either from China or from North Vietnam. Because of the large buildup of enemy troops along the border, we were unable to continue north safely and the lieutenant had decided to cut across the country to Dalat, and from there to the U.S. Military base at Cam Ranh Bay, a distance of about 150 miles.

The entire area was under Communist influence so we had to avoid the villages and travel mostly at night. We had already lost three men in brief, running skirmishes, and of the ten of us who remained, four were ill with exhaustion and festering sores. Using a buddy system, the lieutenant had divided us into five groups of two men each; a healthy man with an ill man, the sergeant and himself. Each pair was given brief copies of the intelligence information so it could be reported if any of us survived.

We averaged about ten miles a night and at the end of the second week of our return trip we were near the border separating Tuyen Duc Province from Ninh Thuan Province. Most of the roads were mined so we had crossed open farmlands or lightly forested areas in as straight a line as possible from south of Dalat towards Cam Ranh. It had been slow and exhausting but we had made it that far without encountering any large hostile forces.

One morning the lieutenant had stopped the group at the edge of a wide rice paddy about an hour before sunrise and set us in a loose defensive circle. Five men would sleep while the other five stood watches in two hour shifts, with the healthy men taking the first watches.

The sun came up smoky yellow-orange above the jungle and faded to a

pale blue-grey, sending broken shards of light across the shallow water of the rice paddy, and the jungle slowly came alive. I had stayed on watch an extra thirty minutes because I wanted my buddy to sleep. He was covered with fungus sores around his waist and crotch, and his feet were raw.

All of us had lost weight because we had diarrhea or other intestinal problems, but he was so weak from a combination of problems that I often had to carry him even over level ground. I had hoped the extra sleep might restore some of his strength so he could walk more often. I was watching him closely because he was breathing so lightly that several times I thought he had died. Suddenly his face exploded and dust jumped from his body. At the same time I heard a pop and the sounds of automatic gunfire to my right, then there were more pops and the trees splintered and crashed around me.

I instinctively rolled away and mashed myself down beside a fallen, rotting log trying to determine where the fire was coming from. I could hear curses and return fire just fifty feet away but the undergrowth was so thick I couldn't tell which direction anyone was firing. I snapped the safety off and pushed my piece out ahead of me, then started crawling towards the sound of the gunfire as slugs thumped and ricocheted all around me.

About thirty feet away I came across two GI's and I checked them quickly; they were both dead. Just ahead of me the next group was returning some heavy fire so I grabbed the dead soldiers' rifles and dragged them with me until I tumbled into a small depression on top of the lieutenant.

He had a hole in his face the size of my fist. Three other GI's were blasting away at everything within range whether it moved or not.

"We're it, cousin. The rest are dead as far we can tell," one of them yelled above the noise.

"You okay?"

I nodded.

"How 'bout your buddy?"

I drew a finger across my throat, then lifted the muzzle of my rifle over the edge of the hole and sprayed a dozen rounds in the general direction of the hostile fire.

"Where the hell are they?" I shouted.

"Everywhere, man," one of them answered.

"How many?"

"Who the hell knows?"

I looked at them between bursts of gunfire; all had been wounded. The guy farthest from me had almost all his left hand missing and he was resting his piece in the crook of his arm to fire while blood formed an ever-increasing puddle a foot from his face. I rolled over to him and yanked him down into the hole, then tied a piece of torn shirt around his hand. He was weak and trembling, and he was star-

ing at the mutilated hand with glassy eyes. After I had finished he looked up at me.

"Goddamn slopes have killed me," he said, then lifted his piece and began firing again. He died before the rifle was empty.

"Thought you wuz okay, cousin," the first guy said to me and poked a finger at my back. I jumped and clenched my teeth with pain. He looked at the wound between my spine and right shoulder blade, and decided it was a fragment of a slug that had ricocheted.

"I didn't even feel it," I said.

"You will," he replied. "Think you can travel?"

"Let's go!"

"Not us; you. Me an' the brutha are dead and this one can't walk."

I looked at the guy in the middle. His bare feet were cracked and swollen red from fungus infection.

'You get out, cousin, before the slopes have a chance to get around behind us."

He turned and began firing into the brush, shouting for the others to help him lay down covering fire. I knew better than to argue with him so I grabbed the bag of exposed film and documents, slung it over my shoulder, and picked up my piece. We looked at each other for a moment.

"Go," he said.

"Good luck."

"Go."

The hostile fire seemed lighter and I figured they had some casualties so maybe those three might make it although it wasn't likely. I jumped over the rim of the hole and rolled to some thick brush, then moved off quickly away from the sounds of the gunfire. I remember thinking that I didn't know any of their names, didn't know where they came from; didn't know any of their families. When I got back to the States, I wanted to be able to go to each of their families and tell them why they never went home, tell them where they were when they died so they wouldn't have to wonder and worry for years that their sons were prisoners in some stinking forced labor camp in the middle of a jungle half way around the world. I thought about all the words I could say to them, good words, kind words about their brave, young men lost so far away. I thought of the women who would weep. I thought of the men who would turn away so I wouldn't see them weep. I thought of children who would grow up wondering where their fathers were.

Not once did I think of dying.

*****

I could go back, I told myself, to the day before that firefight, to the week or month before that firefight, or to two or three years before any of us ever went to Vietnam, and change all their lives. I could save them from hell, and save myself

as well.

I felt nothing. When I arrived at the Root Beer stand in Dayton, Ohio in the year the sergeant graduated from high school, the only things that had changed were the clothing fashions and the model years of the cars.

The sergeant wanted to join the Army and go to Vietnam but his girlfriend talked him into postponing it for a year. They were both killed in an automobile accident six months later.

One of the men whose lives I wanted to save became a drug peddler. Children died and he and other young men were murdered as a result.

Another married and fathered a child who was abducted and slain. He died of grief over it.

And so it went. Not one of the men who were with me on that patrol survived past the day they died in Vietnam. I didn't save them, couldn't save them. I only changed the way and time they died in an alternate reality. But by leaving things as they had occurred in time, I could save the lives of many others who would have suffered otherwise.

The paradox. I wondered if it had to always have the same result. If so, it seemed hardly worth the effort to try to alter the past and future. Perhaps it was not possible to do so.

And as quickly as I remembered, I forgot.

*****

They hated the darkness. It was heavy and evil and it forced itself down upon us, breathing an ominous death. No one wanted to move at night for the darkness belonged to the Viet Cong, the chien si, the sappers, the black painted wraiths who inhabited the ditches and elephant grass, the bamboo and rice paddies, and the roads and alleys and streets when the sun went down and the night was as black as black as black.

They were like children, those GI's, and when they peered into the darkness their eyes were round and full of fear. Their hearts were full of dread and their minds were full of death and cold and lonely sufferings. They thought of their families, of their mothers' comforting breasts and loving words, of prayers, dreams, hopes, and girlfriends.

They wanted to be inside by sundown, huddled together with comrades, listening to their transistor radios and laughing the forced laughs of young men afraid to die. They knew they could die just as easily in the bunkers, the hooches, but they felt that would be preferable to dying in the lonely darkness of a silent, alien, haunted jungle.

A quick bullet in the brain, among comrades who would send their bodies home was better than being left to rot in the jungle pierced by pungi stakes. They wore talismans to ward off the evil and they used marijuana and acid to ward off the fear.

After sundown they would fire their weapons into the darkness in every direction to send the unseen enemy fleeing before their superior firepower, but the enemy was rarely there. The enemy was ghosts and goblins, and the boogie man under the bed. The enemy was women and children, and old men with hand grenades and knives, plastic explosives and AK-47s. The enemy was mantraps and strangle wires, arrows, spears, and hideous, vile, crude wooden stakes that pierced the heart and body and psyche.

They were not afraid to die, those chien si, those old men, those children, those wrinkled thousand year old grandmothers. If Dulce et Decorum Est was not apropos to American GIs, it was an ancient and common belief of the Vietnamese. It was their theme song, their glory, their ultimate task and goal. They buried their dead and envied the burned and maimed, the crippled and disfigured children, because they felt they would have beautiful stories to tell of how they joined the common fight to send the invading armies from their beloved land, and had the scars to prove it. The GIs would never understand a mentality that would sacrifice an entire village to kill one American soldier or down one plane or sink one patrol boat. So they stayed inside and huddled together as if that gave them immunity from the fleeting wraiths of the jungle night.

No one on our Long Range Recon Patrol knew the name of any other member. That was so we wouldn't be forced to reveal names if any of us were captured, and so we called each other man, heyman, buddy, or whatever other name came to mind when we had to talk. We were older. Lifers. No one was under thirty years old. Each of us had a specialty, but each could do the others' jobs if we had to. We were a close group because each of us depended on the others for survival, but none of us were really friends because none of us wanted to get too close to someone who was already dead.

That's the way it was. We lived for the moment, the right now, and didn't think about tomorrow or next week or a time when the war would be over because we knew when we got there, even if we survived and got home without a scratch, this war would never, ever, be over. The wound was in the heart; the scar was in the mind.

There was no place to hide in the sweating, feotid jungle, no place to go, no safe harbor to run to when the going got nasty. There was only the trees, the bamboo, the elephant grass, and the muck and insects. There were flies, mosquitoes, rot, stink, ants, snakes, leeches and the thick, heavy silence, but there was no place to hide. Don't fall apart, don't fall apart. Keep thinking you are going to make it back, make it to safety; make it back to Cam Ranh Bay.

There are no freeways in Vietnam and the jungle grows right up to the back door. Step outside your hooch and you are chin-deep in it. They don't drive Fords to work; they walk. They know every fallen tree, every puddle of stagnate water, every ancient, creaking limb. They can point to every bird nest on any trail they

take from bamboo hut to rice paddy. They know when a flower dies or a leaf falls or a new shoot of bamboo pierces the pungent, damp earth. The jungle is as much a part of their lives as television is a part of ours. The lieutenant had had a plaque on his desk in Saigon:

At the end of the fight is a tombstone white
With the name of the late deceased,
And the epitaph drear: A fool lies here
Who tried to hustle the East.

It was a bastardized version of a poem by Kipling. I had read it once, and memorized it. I had repeated it a hundred times or more while I was trying to get back, alone, to Cam Ranh Bay. Sometimes the darkness had been ripped open by parachute flares that were incredibly bright and lit the jungle like a dozen drifting suns, leaving comet tails dangling beneath them, and I'd had to bury myself under leaves and brush for hours to keep from being captured.

How many days, how many weeks I had walked and crawled through that jungle dragging the bag of film and documents I don't know. Days and nights melted into one unknowable period of time but, eventually, I had gotten there, walking up to the sentry at the gate trying to tell my story, too tired to gesture or elaborate, too weary too explain, too incoherent to be understood.

I had awakened in a hospital where no one spoke of the war. No one mentioned the terror and horror. No one spoke of the mutilation of children or the blistering sores of napalm victims or destroyed villages and ruined farms and defoliated jungles, of saturation bombing or VC or NVA, or hooches, or firefights, or Ho Chi Minh, or Haiphong, or Hanoi. No one spoke, either, of the days of dreaming of home, of girlfriends, jobs, cars, or mom and dad. Everybody had been in between. They couldn't go back and they didn't want to go on. Some had cried. Some had screamed at night, fighting the terror of agonizing nightmares that wouldn't go away. Some had gone quietly insane and had been taken away like crushed little images in wheelchairs to secret rooms and obscurity. We had never seen them again and we had never asked why because we all feared that the knowing would be more than we could bear, would be all it would take to tear away our masks, rip away reality and plunge us, too, into the anonymity of the incurably insane. We had pretended they never existed because we were all too close to being what they were.

Military people had come to ask questions after I had been there almost six weeks. I knew who they were but I couldn't talk to them, couldn't tell them what they wanted to know about the billions of dollars in American money we had found stored in caches along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. I'd been moved to an isolation ward after that and no one except a nurse came to see me for another two weeks, and a shrink with her own strange questions.

A man with sandy hair and green eyes came to see me after I'd been there

for two months. He showed me pictures of the entire group and wanted to know if I could tell him where they were, asked me to show him on a map where they had been left behind or lost.

"Lost? They weren't lost, they were killed."

"Yes, but can you be certain?"

"Dead, mister Halsey. D-E-A-D. Dead."

Could I show him on the map?

"Three here. Six there and three wounded left behind."

"The lieutenant?"

"Definitely the lieutenant."

Had I seen with my own eyes that they were dead?

"Only six."

"Can you identify them from these pictures?"

"That one. That one. Those two. Those two."

He checked them off with quick strokes of his pen. That's how he dealt with the lives and deaths of twelve men. There had been no names to go with the pictures. He'd wanted me to tell him stories about Vietnam but there was nothing I could have told him that he would understand. If he had been there and knew what it was like he wouldn't have had to ask. Like everyone else, he was really interested only in knowing how much money I thought we'd found out there on the trail.

Most people who were there don't talk about Vietnam much and when they do they prefer to talk about the bars and the girls, the drugs and the incredible amount of American money floating around, the black market and the parties. They don't often talk about the invisible enemy in black pajamas who could hide from the gunships, the AC-47s, the AC-54s, the AC-130s, and the Cobras with their chain guns and Vulcan twenty millimeter cannon that could fire 3000 rounds a minute from each gun. They don't talk about saturation bombing or napalm raids, or their buddies whom they left behind stacked in grey metal boxes at the edges of the runways. How does one explain a vision of Hell to one who has not seen it or experienced it?

I'd heard the fop fop fop of helicopter blades punishing the air and had gone to the window to watch an agency helicopter wobble into the sky leaving a group of men in business suits huddled on the pad. More of the big boys, I had thought, who push papers around and make strategic decisions and critical analysis, calculating this risk and that, sticking pins in a board on the wall and never asking questions until everything falls apart.

I counted the tiles on the floor. There were sixty three full pieces, and seventeen half pieces. I counted the ceiling tiles, then counted the holes in each tile. I looked out the window, registering nothing, while I tugged at the bars, hoping they would miraculously fall away so I could escape.

To where?

I stared at the door, willing it to open, or be opened, revealing someone who would have me sign a piece of paper that would release me forever from that cold, sterile, empty, smothering room.

I made secret promises to God as I squatted in the corner at night. I made secret promises to Jesus, then I made promises to Krishna, to Odin, to Hertha, to my mother and father, my brothers, my wife and children, and to friends. I invented new gods and made promises to them with tears streaming down my face. And I made promises to myself, oh yes, as I rocked back and forth in the darkness beside the locked door.

I don't recall that I kept many of the promises, so they became lies, pigeonholed in some dark well of my mind where I couldn't find them, ever, again.

The sandy haired man with the green eyes had asked me then where I wanted to go for my next duty station and I couldn't tell him. I hadn't known. Somewhere. Anywhere away from there. I'd told him it really didn't matter anymore. I hadn't had time to grasp the reality that I was headed for a duty station in the United States. Too much of me had still been lost in Vietnam. He had told me that he would put in a good word for me, then he'd left.

There is a point in our lives where we must pause and redefine ourselves as human beings, unique and separate, yet, somehow, connected to all the other human beings we've met, whether we've loved them or hated them. Such introspection, and the decisions derived from it, broadens our choices while narrowing the paths we may take on our journey through life.

That fleeting glance into myself came for me one evening in that isolation cell at Ton Son Nuht Air Force Base near Saigon, Vietnam. I have but to close my eyes and the image of the cold, austere room springs unbidden to my mind, as clear today as it was so many years ago.

When desperation overcame me, I squatted in the corner making promises to God I knew I would never keep, searching for the reasons for my incarceration, the meaningless rationale for the patrol, the meaning, the cause and effect of my participation, some redeeming factor for living.

But God never answered the questions, never acknowledged the promises, made no sign in the darkened room that IT even cared whether I lived or died. There were no flashes of inspiration, no sounds of superhuman voices from the sky, no descending orbs of light to comfort and succor me. The answer came from myself, from a future Richard Constable who somehow managed to project himself to that miserable tiny cell on the other side of the planet, on the back side of time and space.

And the only thing the future me said during that brief visit was that each of us is expected to look after his own soul and none other. That and nothing else.

I found out later, after I had gotten to my next duty station, that all the men of

the Recon Group had been officially listed as missing in action. I had wondered briefly what had ever become of me.

*****

Experience changes us in very definite ways, but no two people are ever changed the same way by virtue of having shared the same adventure. Because we experience them in different ways, our reactions and the memories we carry away are not the same as our fellow travellers.

'Never assume your travelling companions know what they're doing,' Dallas Calhoun once told me, 'because they usually know as little as you, and often much less.'

That was just another way of saying every man has to look after his own soul the way I see it.

I didn't change the events that wounded me in Vietnam, but I went back just long enough to tell the frightened young man in that terrible room that each of us is responsible for his own soul and none other.

It made all the difference in the world. It was enough to sustain me forty-six years into the future and I was glad that I had done it despite the injury and despair of the years that followed. In very minor ways I was diminished by the events that directed my life after Vietnam, but in more ways I knew that I was strengthened by them.

If everything happens for a reason—and I believe that—then knowing and loving Brandy, even for a few brief years, was worth the trouble. If my life had been different I would never have met her.

When I returned to my computer room in San Diego, I was still seated at my computer desk and my coffee was still steaming in the mug. The trip back forty-six years into the past had taken less than one second, less than one tick of the clock.

The only evidence that I had been away were the tears in my eyes and I couldn't even remember why I was crying.

SIX

I had plenty to write about. I considered writing a book or a screenplay about time travel. After all, time travel was impossible and no one would believe a tale so unlikely. I thought I might get away with it but, after some deliberation, I decided it was a bad idea. There were, at the very least, a half dozen federal agents who might just wonder where I was getting my ideas.

So I shelved my enthusiasm for time travel and concentrated instead on getting my affairs in order in case I had to leave without further notice. One of the first things I had to do was to clean out the cabin up at Big Bear Lake and put it on the market. I hadn't been there for nearly a year and it was looking derelict even then. I could hardly imagine how it looked now.

The best way to get from San Diego to Big Bear is in a motorhome. It was nearly ready to go, needed only food, water, fuel and some of my clothes. I spent the morning of the following Friday getting ready, tucked the time machine into my shirt pocket, locked the house and drove away.

If I thought I was going to have a pleasant few days at the cabin, I was wrong. An hour after I arrived, Monica Dodd pulled in behind the motorhome. I stood on the porch, hands on hips and watched as she slithered out of the agency sedan, smiled that disarming smile and managed a little girl wave of her hand.

Rats. I huffed with exasperation and helped her up the sagging wooden steps.

"I'm going to sell the place," I explained, "but, as you can see, it needs some work before I can put it on the market."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why are you selling it? Are you going somewhere?"

"No, Monica. I have only been here once since my wife left and it hardly seems worth keeping. The place is falling apart."

She appraised the cabin quickly, smiled, and asked if we could sit and talk for awhile. I wanted to tell her to get in the car and go away, leave me alone so I could do all the things I felt I needed to do.

Said, instead, "I'll fetch some iced tea from the motorhome," and motioned her to a faded Adirondak chair. Maybe she would say what she had to say and go on back to San Diego. She hadn't brought any papers or briefcases or shotguns with her that I could see as I passed the sedan, so maybe her visit would be brief.

"Aren't you going to ask how I knew you would be here?" she asked as I handed her a glass of iced tea.

"No."

"Oh. Well, I... ."

"What do you want, Monica?"

"Well, I thought first I would apologize for being so rude on the trip back from the demonstration. I... it was difficult for me to accept that the Accelerator didn't work properly. I'm sorry I took it out on you."

"Accelerator."

"Yes," she said. "The Accelerator, the time machine."

I began to remember events as she explained her frustration. Raymond Templeton. Future Industries. The demonstration. The missing pages from the manual and the disappearing transport disks. I remembered parts of it, much as I might remember a half-forgotten dream or nightmare and resisted the urge to touch the time machine in my pocket to assure myself it was still there.

"You don't have to apologize, Monica. I don't think it was supposed to work. I think it was an incomplete project. Templeton didn't have time to put it all to-

gether before he disappeared."

She nodded and worked her fingers into five little steeples. "At any rate, Future Industries has decided to pursue their testing of it at their new facility in Ohio," she said.

"Ah. Ohio," I replied with appalling disinterest.

"Yes, at Q-Tech's new Akron testing facility. They thought about transferring a team of engineers out here, but decided to ship the Accelerator to Akron instead, and continue with their investigation of it there."

"They're determined to make it work, I guess."

"They are, and they feel certain they will succeed."

I remembered then what Raymond had told me about the development of the time machine in the future; the little one I had in my pocket. Someone was going to figure it out and neither I nor anyone else was going to prevent it from happening. I just had a twenty-five year head start on them.

"Okay," said I. "Why are you telling me? I really could not care less about the damned thing. In the first place, I think it is dangerous, especially in the hands of those who are most likely financing it and, in the second place, if it is what you say it is and it can do what you think it might do, seems to me it should be classified. In which case, I ask again, why tell me?"

"Are you being obstinant?" She arched an eyebrow at me.

"I am being practical. I don't care and I don't want to know, I don't think it is any of my business, and... ."

"It is more your business than anyone's," she interrupted. "And who do you think is financing it?"

"The military."

"Ummm," she nodded, knowing I'd guessed the truth of the matter. "Well, I should have known you could figure that out. How old are you?"

"What?"

"How old are you? You know, in years."

"It has been sixty-five years since I fell to Earth to inhabit this mortal coil," I said. "Why do you want to know?"

"Curiosity," Monica Dood said, uncurling her fingers and brushing them through her hair. "I would have guessed you were younger."

"I thought maybe you were going to say that if I wanted to live to be sixty-six I should be more cooperative."

"You would. That's silly." She opened her mouth to say something else, thought better of it and teased her hair again.

"Old enough to be your father." I said it for her.

She blushed, said nothing, looked away toward the greening shade.

"Are you going to tell me why you followed me up here?" I asked after her embarrassment was under control. "Or tell me why you think this time machine

nonsense is more my business than anyone else's?"

"Same question with the same answer," she replied, looking me straight in the eye to see if I'd flinch.

"Okay, I'm ready."

"You and Raymond Templeton have had some conversations and more than one meeting, brief as they might have been. We're interested to know why and what you discussed, and where he has gone." She made quote marks with her fingers when she said the word "gone."

"As far as I know," said I, "he has 'gone' home to be with his wife and kids. What we discussed is what his father said and how he acted when he disappeared several years ago. I think... ." I couldn't finish the thought. I was having more than a little trouble remembering Raymond and his father, as if someone was erasing them from my memory as I sat there trying to conjure up pictures of them.

"Yes?"

"Nothing. I can't remember much of what we talked about. Idle talk about his dad and mom, probably."

"Probably?"

"Probably."

Monica stood, arching a kink from her back. The Adirondak chair was not the most comfortable thing in which to sit for long periods. She walked to the railing where she could see down the side of the cabin into the dark forest beyond, rocked there on the balls of her feet with her hands behind her back. Presently she turned back toward me.

"Do you know what a non-linear event is, Richard?" she asked.

"An event that is not linear, probably."

Her eyes flashed, cleared. She smiled the disarming smile. "A non-linear event is an event that has no beginning and no end. No explanation, no continuity, no place in a universe of order. A non-linear event is Judson Templeton appearing on the pavement outside a storage building rented under your name, then vanishing from the morgue leaving not so much as a hair or flake of skin at the same time that his son, Raymond, is seen lurking near your home, and who has also vanished without a trace leaving not a hair or flake of skin to attest to his having ever existed on this planet."

I scowled. "If he has done that, how do you know he, or his father for that matter, appeared or vanished. If they didn't exist, how do you have memory of them?"

She sighed long and heavily. "We have some photos... we had some photos...they have gone bad, faded or bleached out, and some written reports about the event that... ."

"The non-linear event."

"Yes, the non-linear event, that has prevented them from slipping out of our

memories completely. And his wife is back there." She waved her hand across the sky in the general direction of San Diego. "She, Jessica Rose, has filed a missing person on him." She walked back and perched on the edge of the Adirondak, folded her skirt under her thighs and caught it behind her knees.

I noticed her thighs and she noticed that I noticed. I was about to say something shallow but she spoke first.

"Did Raymond give you anything before he left?"

"How do you know he left? What makes you think he has 'gone' somewhere?"

"Did he give you anything?"

"Like what?"

"Like the pages from the instruction manual or twelve lavender transport disks."

I went blank and cocked my head trying to remember something about the disks.

"About this big," said Monica, making a circle with her arms.

"Disks."

"Lavender. About this big."

"I don't recall that Raymond had anything like that or left anything around my place before I chased him off."

Monica leaned forward with her elbows on her knees and fixed me with her green eyes; her green, flashing, wicked, inquiring eyes.

"One thing about a non-linear event, one result, is that when it is done, people are unable to remember much about it. It is a disjointed vignette that has no beginning or end and they soon are unable to recall it at all. Do you remember Judson Templeton?"

"Of course," said I. "He was on the Shuttle."

"He was dead on the pavement outside your storage shed last week. Do you remember that?"

"How could he have been here when he has been there since 1986?" I pointed toward the sky.

Monica pursed her lips. "Time machine," she said after a suitable pause.

"Time machine," I howled. "What a joke!" I rocked back and forth in my chair, pretending to be hysterical until she reached over and smacked me on the arm.

"Time machine," she said and she was as serious as a heart attack. "He has one and I—we—think you have another. Do you?"

"I don't. But if I did have one, it wouldn't be any business of yours, would it?"

She let the hem of her skirt drop from where she had captured it behind her knees and stood abruptly, walked to the steps and held the rail. She was on the

verge of leaving, just like that. She gazed down the driveway toward the motorhome and, without looking at me, asked, "Would you mind telling me how small it is?"

"I don't have a time machine, Monica. Not large, not small."

"I see. You know, Richard, maybe I shouldn't say it, but you should give some thought toward ending this dangerous, misdirected *vagabondage*." She said *vagabondage* with a prefect French accent, turned to me, smiled disarmingly, walked to her car, held the door open and turned toward me with dark eyes.

"If I were you, I'd be watching the road over there for Issac Court and Brad Ironsmith for the next day or so," she said. Moments later, she drove away.

I knew she would be back with muscle to help her get the information she wanted. The agency did not give up on anything this important so easily. Sooner or later they were going to make me talk about the time machine and I knew it would be sooner rather than later. Truth to tell, I was having considerable trouble trying to keep everything in sequence. Events were getting mixed up inside my head and I couldn't remember what happened first or why.

Non-linear event. The paradox. I touched the cell-phone size time machine in my pocket again, looked at my watch. Maybe I could go back to before Monica drove up the path, and walk into the woods until she got tired of waiting for me so she and I would not have the previous conversation.

In the end, the idea was too complicated for me to work out. I decided to continue cleaning the cabin and stacking debris to be hauled away. But in the back of my mind was the growing dreadful realization that Monica Dodd, if not the entire agency, was convinced I had in my possession a time machine with remarkable capabilities. Monica was not some lame brained chick; she was sharp, intuitive, able to see the whole game plan with one quick glance. She knew I was lying about the time machine. Too many people had been snooping around the house, watching and listening. They knew Raymond had been there for more than one casual visit. It was not a difficult path of reasoning to conclude that all the strange, non-linear events that had happened in the last fews days were of Raymond's making and that I—because Raymond had demonstrated more than passing interest in me—was privy to his secrets.

To an agent of D.I.C.E., that would mean I knew about the time machine and must have one of them hidden somewhere. Monica had asked how small it was. I suspected she had an idea it might be the size of a microwave oven or a desktop computer. If she only knew I could hold it in the palm of my hand and have plenty of hand left over for other stuff, she might be astonished.

SEVEN

In my dream, in my last morning-dream, I stood today on a promontory beyond the world; I held a pair of scales, and weighed the world. Alas, that the rosy

dawn came too early to me: she glowed me awake, the jealous one! Jealous is she always of the glows of my morning-dream.

Measurable by him who hath time, weighable by a good weigher, attainable by strong pinions, divinable by divine nut-crackers; thus did my dream find the world. My dream, a bold sailor, half-ship, half-hurricane, silent as the butterfly, impatient as the falcon; how had it the patience and leisure today for world-weighing! Did my wisdom perhaps speak secretly to it, my laughing, wide-awake day-wisdom, which mocketh at all "infinite worlds"? For it saith: "Where force is, there becometh number the master: it hath more force."

How confidently did my dream contemplate this finite world, not new-fangledly, not old-fangledly, not timidly, not entreatingly: As if a big round apple presented itself to my hand, a ripe golden apple, with a coolly-soft, velvety skin; thus did the world present itself unto me: As if a tree nodded unto me, a broad-branched, strong-willed tree, curved as a recline and a footstool for weary travellers; thus did the world stand on my promontory. As if delicate hands carried a casket towards me; a casket open for the delectation of modest adoring eyes; thus did the world present itself before me today.

from Thus Spake Zarathustra

A neighbor, Stan Baxter, who had lived next door for nearly ten years ambled over after Monica's car had disappeared down the hill. He greeted me with a wave of his hand and mentioned that he hadn't seen me around lately.

"Busy down there with the flatlanders," I explained, pushing my chin towards the south. "I should have got up more often, I guess. I'm going to sell the place."

"Really? How much you asking?"

"What's the going price these days?"

He waved an arm to his right. "Jack Collins sold his place last month for a eight hundred thousand so I guess that's the going price."

"Seems high to me," I said. "I'll probably start at two hundred thousand and see if I can unload it right away."

He squinted his eyes at me. "Something wrong with it?"

"No. It's just more trouble than fun these days. I'll have to split the money with my ex-wife and I want to have done with it so I can get on with my life."

"Have you listed it with a Realtor?"

"Not yet. I need to clean it up a bit first."

He rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet for awhile, pursed his lips and made me an offer on the spot, offering to do the paperwork and cleaning himself. Two hours later, after accepting his good faith check and agreeing that he would have all the papers and checks sent to Brandy's address, we shook hands on the deal and he went home. I figured he would sweep out the dust and brush

away the spider webs, slap on a coat of paint and sell it for a five hundred thousand dollar profit.

And that was fine with me. My memories of the cabin were bittersweet. It was a nice place to visit when Brandy was with me, but an awful and lonely place without her. It had become an albatross and I was pleased to be rid of it. I could load all I wanted to keep into the motorhome and never look back.

It was late evening before I was nearly finished packing the few things I wanted to keep. I started a pot of coffee perking on the motorhome range and went back into the cabin to see if I had collected everything worth keeping. The furniture stayed, the pictures and carpets, the appliances, radios, television, the piano neither of us had learned to play.

I kept the comforters, linen, towels and a box of photographs which I would cull later; the shotgun and a box of shells, my hunting gear, an axe and two K-Bar knives; all of the canned food.

I was walking to the motorhome with the last box of food when a car turned off the main road and crunched toward me. A new, black sedan with blackwall tires and government plates.

Issac Court and Brad Ironsmith, just as Monica had warned.

I thought for a moment that I might make it to the motorhome and the Remington 870 Police 12 gauge, but by the time I had processed the idea, the sedan stopped and both agents sat stoically to see what I was going to do. I think they wanted me to run so they would have an excuse to shoot me and, because I was so tired of everything just then, I was really tempted to let them do it.

They followed me to the door of the motorhome, waited until I had stored the box of food, then persuaded me to invite them into the cabin.

They don't give up, these clowns. They wanted to know what I knew about Raymond Templeton and his time machine. They went through the same questions a half dozen times and I gave them the same answers. Presently, I remembered the coffee perking on the range in the motorhome and excused myself to go turn off the flame.

"Let it burn," Ironsmith growled.

Court stood and headed for the door. "I'll do it," he said, glowering at Ironsmith as he passed.

I waited until I saw Court pull himself into the motorhome before I reached out an whacked Ironsmith on the temple. He hit the floor like a free falling safe, and I was up and out the door, streaked across the yard in the dim light, reached the road just as a rusty 1950 Chevrolet pickup truck came moaning up the grade. I slid down the road cut embankment as the truck passed me and swung awkwardly into the bed atop a load of groceries. The driver didn't turn to see what the racket was so I figured I'd made it without being seen.

A half mile further up the road, the truck slowed and turned into a gravel

drive. I got into a crouching position so I could leap out just before the truck stopped but the driver hit the brakes abruptly and I was thrown into the bottom of the truck bed.

The door opened, slammed. A woman's voice grumbled at me.

"You gonna lay there all night? Bring them groceries up to the house." She marched toward the house without looking back. "Least you could do for the ride."

I jumped out of the truck, hoisted the three bags of groceries and followed her to the house. She was a tiny woman with white hair stuffed under a Navy watchcap. She was wearing one of those inside-out sheepskin coats like Dallas Calhoun used to wear, faded jeans and lumberjack boots. I was guessing that under all the foul weather gear she didn't weigh much over a hundred pounds.

"Sorry about that, M'am," I said. "I really had to...uh...get away from a couple of guys back there at my house. I hope I didn't scare you."

"Scare me?" she turned and yelled at me. "Scare me? Listen, if I ever get scared of somebody like you, I'll have my neighbors hit me in the head with an axe handle. I was at Pearl Harbor when the Japs bombed the place. I shoveled up dead bodies for weeks. You try that and you'll never be afraid of anything for the rest of your life. Scared? Not flaming likely. Put the groceries on the table. You can sit there. Take yer shoes off there."

She pointed in three directions at the same time, peering at me over her bifocals. "Don't need you tracking dirt on my carpet. Why you running from people in your own house?"

"They think I know something about something they want. Something they're working on."

"They cops?"

"Not exactly. They're... ."

"Federal men from the looks of their car."

"Yes." I was amazed that she had noticed the agency sedan under the dark trees.

She stacked cans like rows of ammunition. Everything had a place. I was imagining that the paint under every box was discolored exactly in the shape of the box that was being placed upon the shelf. I shivered involuntarily at the thought.

"You in trouble with the feds, then?"

"No, I... ."

"What's yer name?"

"What?"

"What's yer name? You got a name?"

"Yes. Richard Constable."

"I'm Ollie. How come I haven't seen you around this neighborhood before?"

I explained it as briefly as I could but left out the parts about Brandy and my misadventures with the federal government, the *vagabondage* to which Monica

Dodd had referred. That seemed to satisfy her curiosity. I added that I suspected Court and Ironsmith might mount a house-to-house search and that I would appreciate it if she would not mention she had seen me.

"Goes without saying," she nodded. "I don't have any love for the *federales*. That's why most of these people live up here. No love for the federal government. But something tells me you're one of them or used to be."

"Long time ago, Allie. I... ."

"Ollie."

"What?"

"Name's Ollie, not Allie."

"Okay," said I. "What's that short for?"

"Olivia, but nobody calls me that. You call me that and I'll boot you in the butt. You were telling me about a long time ago."

Was I? I tried to remember what I'd been saying. Something about working for D.I.C.E. I worked it out and began telling her how I'd been recruited to help with an operation to recover some stolen money, that our mission had been successful, but that the agency had not kept their promise not to annoy me in the future. I wisely omitted the part about the time machine, primarily because I didn't want her trying to boot me in the butt for pulling wool over her eyes.

"They don't give up," I said.

"Like I don't know that. They are relentless if nothing else." She folded the three empty bags and slid them into a rack made just for the purpose, then excused herself. When she returned five minutes later, she had brushed her white hair down, shed the sheepskin coat and patted on a light patina of makeup. Without all the gear and with the addition of cosmetics, she appeared to be about seventy years old and, sure enough, time had whittled her down to about ninety-five pounds. She seemed not to be a woman who patted cosmetics on her face as a daily routine, and that led me to think I was the first man in her house in a long while.

I was peering intently at a little pile of debris on the floor by the front door when she walked into the room. It consisted of a tiny plastic doll, a small beaded purse, three leaves, a twig, a feather and a shirt button attached to a scrap of cloth.

"Cat money," she said.

"Cat...money? I don't get it," I said, screwing up my face.

"They're bribes the cat brings me to get into the house. She brings me a bribe and lays it on the porch. If I don't let her in right away, she brings me something else until I open the door and let her in. Sometimes she brings me a mouse or a bird. Once she brought me a snake. Dead, of course. I'd let her in if she brought nothing but she doesn't know that and, besides, it's a game she likes to play, so I play along."

"How long did it take you to teach her to do that?"

"You don't teach cats to do things; they teach you. They live their lives like cats and you're supposed to learn how to adapt to it. If you don't, they piss on your stuff. That's their way of telling you you aren't too bright. They bring cat money and you're supposed to have enough brains to know it's the price of admission. Cats assume humans are smart enough to figure it out all by themselves which, actually, is saying a lot more for some humans than they deserve. That little pile right there is worth about six dollars and forty-seven cents and that's enough to get her into the house any day."

I shook my head in amazement at this secret little cat and human game that occurred here day after day. I thought about all the cat money that had been deposited on my doorsteps in years past that I hadn't the common sense to recognize. It made me feel rather... well, human.

"What're you gonna do about the people down at your house?" she asked abruptly.

"Wait until they leave, then go finish my business."

"Which is?"

"Cleaning it out so my neighbor can move in."

"You moving out, then?'

"Yes."

She seemed disappointed and turned away, got busy with pots and pans. Presently she smiled ruefully. "You have time to eat before you ran?" she asked. "I'm gonna have porkchops and eggs and I'd be okay with making the same for you."

I thanked her and explained that I needed to return to my home to see if Court and Ironsmith had given up looking for me. If I was lucky, I said, they would return to San Diego and stop annoying me.

"But this fellow, Ironsmith, had a crow to pick with me before tonight. I knocked him unconscious once before, and I'm certain he'll be wanting to even the score straightaway he finds me unprepared."

"Then stay prepared," Ollie smiled. "I'll drive you back."

With that, she disappeared into the back of the house, emerged moments later with the coat and watchcap, and trudged back to the pickup. We rode in silence until she pulled into the drive leading to my home, now devoid of the agency sedan.

"You're different," she said, apropos of nothing. "Most men I've met are as boring as a Baptist temple, but I've an idea you've had some real adventures in your time."

"I have, Ollie," I replied. "Sadly, most of them have been unpleasant; some to the point of despair, others to the point of madness; a few to the point of suicide." A vision of Brandy sprang unbidden to my mind and I stared woefully out the window.

"I see," Ollie said softly. "Lost a wife over it. Well."

I opened the door, stepped out onto the duff at the edge of the driveway, pushed the door shut and stood dumbly in the chill evening until Ollie rolled the window down, leaned toward me and extended her hand.

"Olivia Perkins," she said softly. "You ever get back this way, drop by and I'll fix you some chops and eggs."

"Thank you, Olivia Perkins. I will take you up on that."

She backed the old pickup to the road and soon disappeared up the hill.

I checked the motorhome as I passed, made sure it was secure and not harboring one or both of the rebarbative agents, then went into the house and got a fire thumping on the grate, wishing that I had accepted Ollie's invitation to a meal of eggs and porkchops. My jaws ached at the thought of it and I realized I hadn't eaten since the previous day. Nothing but coffee. That prompted me to go back to the motorhome to fetch a can of stew, a saucepan, a spoon and some bread. I prepared the stew quickly and wolfed it down.

The wind was up from the east. The Santa Ana winds would soon be upon us with the threat of fire. I was glad to be ridding myself of the house; it was just one more thing I didn't have to worry about.

I had finished the stew and was languishing awkwardly in a reclining chair, nearly asleep, when the hair prickled on my arms and back of my neck, a crackling of blue light snapped through the room and Raymond Templeton appeared. It took me a moment to realize what was happening, to recognize him, to spring the chair upright and try to stand. He spun around, a bit surprised to find me only inches from his face, managed a sly, goatish smile, and stepped backward the better to see me.

"Damn, uh, uh, Raymond," I muttered, trying with some difficulty to remember where I had met him and why he might be in my house. I realized that, until he reappeared, I had forgotten him. The Paradox, he would have said, had he spoken.

He did not. He reached into the jumpsuit he was wearing and produced a slim sheaf of papers, stapled at the corner, and well dog-eared, shoved it toward me.

"You need to know this stuff," he said. "It is a brief history of the research that has led to the time machine you have. I tried to include all the important data, but I omitted much that might have been too technical for you to understand clearly. It is enough to prepare you for your future time jumps."

I looked from the papers to him and back to the papers, turned them over and dropped them onto the fireside bench. I was speechless, still stunned witless by his sudden appearance and the meaningless sheaf of papers. I sat abruptly and shook my head vigorously to chase away his image. When I opened my eyes, he was still there, still smiling his cunning little smile, fixing me with his clever

eyes.

"Are you okay?" he asked presently.

"I...uh...yes. Yes, I am." I looked at the papers. "No I'm not. Who are you? What do you want?"

He explained, recounted our first and subsequent meetings, the time machines, his jump to meet his father in the recent past, his success in saving his life. "He is alive, Richard. I reached him in time to prevent him from coming back."

"Who?"

"My father, Judson Templeton. He came back... ."

He saw that I clearly did not know what he was talking about. "Oh, you have forgotten us. That's one of the awkward side effects of moving around in time. Once someone leaves this timeline, everyone, even family members, begin to forget they were ever here. That is the way it should be, I suppose."

"How is it, then, that you remember me?"

"Ah! Not as easy as you might imagine. I had trouble locating you because you have used the time machine to jump back in time. I had to plot three coordinates to reach you here.

"As you jump from time to time, from location to location, you will always forget what you left behind. Where you are in time is where you believe you belong, where you have always been. But when you return to your original timeline, the memories will return instantly. As if you never left. Well, it is not exactly that simple, but the changes are so slight that you may not notice them. We...you...will never come back to exactly the same timeline. You'll get used to it. The changes don't seem to affect our present or future. Well, not in any significant way, at least."

I touched my shirt pocket to assure myself the time machine was still there. Raymond watched, smiled when I remembered meeting him and talking to him in San Diego. It seemed years had passed. I suspected that, from Raymond's point of view, years or centuries may have passed. It was an humbling concept.

"I'm going back now," Raymond said, gripping my shoulder. "My father is waiting to see how well this conversation has gone. As you continue to jump, you'll see what I mean. It will get easier each time. Soon you'll jump with ease. Read the abstract."

He removed his tiny time machine and pressed a few keys.

Poong. He erased himself again.

The empty house seemed suddenly vast beyond description and I felt urgently small and insignificant. I wished Raymond would return to keep me company, to assure me that I was not going completely mad. If the time in which we find ourselves is the only time we believe is real, I realized I had already jumped into a different time, that I was already moving in a different direction with an alternate identity. I was actually a bit frightened just then.

I looked at the papers on the fireside bench. Raymond had admonished me

to read them. I took them up and got comfortable in the recliner, clicked on the lamp and began to read.

EIGHT

While the Phoenix Project was investigating weather and the use of radiosondes, Project Rainbow resurfaced in 1947 or 1948. Project Rainbow (The Navy Experiment) was funded to continue research into the phenomena encountered aboard a U. S. Navy destroyer escort. This project was concerned with electromagnetic technology.

Dr. John von Neumann and his research team, loaned to the Manhattan Project during the Second War, were called back and put to work on a new agenda. It was similar to Rainbow but had a different goal. They were to find out how to protect humans within an electromagnetic field so vessels and crews could be transported through space and time without harm to either or any.

By the early 1950's, Project Rainbow and the radiosonde weather project were included under the same funding and "Phoenix Project" was used as a cover title to refer to all of these "black" activities.

Dr. von Neumann, a mathematician and theoretical physicist who came from Germany, was placed in charge of Phoenix. He was noted for his advanced concepts of space and time. He originated and built the first vacuum tube computer at Princeton University, where he served as the head of the Institute for Advanced Study. He had the ability to apply advanced theories to technology and, because of these qualifications, he could easily communicate with Einstein and acted as liaison between him and engineers serving on the project.

Von Neumann quickly learned that he was going to have to study metaphysics; to understand the metaphysical side of man. The Rainbow experiment had disassembled the physical and biological structure of human beings. Crew members had melded with bulkheads and changed beyond recognition. Those who had survived were quite mad or died later from madness and some strange internal burning.

Project engineers and scientists spent nearly ten years working out why human beings had troubles with electromagnetic fields that lofted them through different times and spaces. It now appears they discovered that humans are born with what is known as a "time reference" point. At conception, an energy being (human) is attached to a time line and must begin life manifest as flesh from that point. To understand this, it is necessary to view the "energy being" or soul as completely different from the physical body.

Our references as both a physical and metaphysical being appears to have origin in the time reference residing within the electromagnetic background of Earth. This time reference is the basic orientation point to the way the universe operates. Time, in the normal context, appears always to flow in one direction—

forward—at least to our limited senses.

But the Rainbow technology apparently creates an alternate reality having its existence entirely within the quantum field, literally transferring material objects out of our "normal" time and space. This accounts for the light-invisibility of the U. S. Navy destroyer escort Eldridge and her crew.

The alternate reality created by the shift has no time references because it is not part of the normal forward flow of time. For the person who was experiencing the phenomenon uninstructed, it would be like having an intense and enduring nightmare wherein nothing makes any sense.

So Phoenix engineers were faced with solving the problem of letting human test subjects get into and out of the quantum field without harm by somehow connecting them to the time reference they could recognize as the planet Earth. This meant that when they were in the alternate reality, they had to be equipped mentally with something that would give them a "real time" reference.

Engineers solved this by feeding in all the required natural background information of the Earth to convince test subjects of a continuous stream real earth time reference so they would not experience trans-dimensional disorders. Test subjects would believe they were still in Earth "real-time."

Dr. von Neumann was the ideal Director for the Phoenix Projects. He knew computers would have to be used if they were going to calculate the time references of specific people and replicate those references while they were in the quantum field, otherwise the test subjects would be experiencing essentially "no reality" or a continuous nightmare reality at best.

The computer had to be programmed to generate an electromagnetic background with which the test subjects could synchronize. If not done, the soul and the physical body time and space reference points would be out of sync, resulting in dissolution and insanity or inability to return to Earth real time.

Because they were dealing with two separate and distinct entities—the spiritual human and the physical human—the time reference would be required to lock in the spirit, and the electromagnetic background would be required to lock in the body. The technology, begun in 1948, was apparently fully developed by 1967, during the height of the Vietnam conflict.

When the project's first phase was complete, a report was submitted to the Congressional committee from which funds had been appropriated. Congressional members were told that the consciousness of man could definitely be affected by electromagnetism and, additionally, that it would be possible to develop electronic hardware and software that could literally change the way a person thinks about anything and everything.

The committee, fearing they would be first on the list of new test subjects, refused to refinance and Project Phoenix was disbanded in 1969.

But the scientists and engineers at Q-Tech had spent too much time, effort

and money on Phoenix to just scrap it and walk away. Their empire was in place, the technology was secure, and the engineers were looking for a mission. What they needed was funding from a secret agency to continue with the mind control experiments. The military seemed the most logical source.

When told a device had been developed that would alter the way people—and particularly soldiers—would think and act, military pundits were beside themselves with joy. Such a device could not only change the outcome of a battle already begun, it might be used to convince entire populations that war is not only unnecessary, but completely impossible. Or that total war was the only solution to a political crisis.

Phoenix had found its mission.

Exploration into telepathy, teleportation, transportation, levitation, translocation and tentative excursions backward and forward in time has continued almost without cease from 1948 until the present time. The results of the Navy experiments, disastrous as they might have been at the time, provided fuel and data for a series of programs and black projects that now consumes a great portion of America's defense budgets.

Scientists and engineers learned how to alter and direct weather, how to create storms or to vanquish natural storms by tapping into the planet's orgone energy and turning it on or off at will. This series, under the title of Project Phoenix, would later absorb Project Rainbow and others, and the entire curriculum would be known as Phoenix.

One facet of the Phoenix Project was intense research into various areas of paranormal activity, particularly telepathy. The military was well aware that the Soviets were involved in paranormal research, and they knew that if sensitive espers could be found who possessed skills or powers strong enough to nullify Soviet espers or even overpower them, America might have an incredible superweapon with whom they could defeat any foe, military or civilian.

When Congress refused to refinance Phoenix and disbanded the group, they had no idea some zealous scientists would seek support elsewhere. When scientists approached the military and told them what they had accomplished and what could be developed from the research, facilities were eagerly prepared, equipment purchased and millions of dollars began to appear from more than one unknown source. By 1970 the Q-Tech group as well as several elite universities worldwide were deeply involved in paranormal research. Some of these splinter projects involved use of drugs and hallucinogens; others not. Some experiments were conducted using electromagnetic fields. A few purists tapped only the mind-power of their test subjects (whom they considered "expendables").

Investigation quickly revealed that telepathic waves, while not radio waves, behaved similar to radio waves and could, therefore, be controlled, modulated and directed with the use of proper equipment. Scientists were elated. They had

discovered (or rediscovered) electromagnetic functions unlike anything ever reported in scientific journals and textbooks. They were on the verge of wholly new discoveries in human mind power.

Because the projects were funded by and controlled by the military and federal intelligence agencies, the data gathered was delivered to them and filed away in war rooms and at secret military bases. The general public, by and large, was unaware of these insidious mind-probing activities.

Out of early research came the revelation that certain radio frequencies in the 410-420 MHz range could effectively block human thought patterns, leaving test subjects unable to perform their tasks. Unknown to the researchers and test subjects at the time, the military had established a secret base on the east coast and was using a jamming device in the form of a modified radar antenna that, for 14 years, from 1970 until about 1984, beamed thought altering electromagnetic frequencies toward thousands of Americans in dozens of New England communities.

These thought altering waves would cause crowds to gather and then suddenly disperse in bewilderment; cause an increase in crime, including murder, in areas receiving the frequencies, and stimulated increased delinquency and rebellion among teenagers. When the signals were turned off, these communities would return to normal. The body snatchers had arrived!

When the base was suddenly abandoned in 1983 or 1984, the former residents left behind nearly all their equipment, papers and military orders. Military transfer orders discovered by other researchers were complete and accurate in every detail, except that some had large words scrawled across them: GONE!

This odd defacing of official government orders could not be explained until further investigation revealed what intelligence agencies had paid for at the secret base. They had been sending their test subjects, all males, some military, some civilians, back and forth through time!

Espers found the base surrounded with unusual vibrations and images; remnants of unusual weather patterns, mind control and beings that had been created from the ether out of the thoughts of test subjects. The investigators were certain something remarkable had happened at the facility and set out to discovered what it was. Their focal starting point was the premise that everyone on the base had vanished at nearly the same time, perhaps the same day, and that they had no time to actually shut down the base or decommission it. In fact, the base did not officially exist.

Except that it was in a state of general disarray when they arrived, investigators found materials, machines, supplies, reports, buildings and support gear in place as if the base might still be operational. But all the people were gone. Without a trace.

Citizens in nearby cities revealed that while the base was operating, strange

things, other than increase in crime and delinquency, had happened. Large groups of animals would suddenly charge into town and crash through windows. It snowed in August. Hurricane force winds suddenly came from nowhere and as quickly subsided. Thunderstorms, lightning and hail would appear and vanish when no meteorological indications of such violent storms had been present.

In 1947, federal agencies in America began an extensive research project into the specific control of weather. This was the original Phoenix project and was developed from data provided earlier by Austrian scientist Dr. Wilhelm Reich. Most of his research data was burned by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and is no longer available for general reading.

Dr. Reich was best known for his discovery of a force he called "orgone" energy, orgasmic or life energy, the existence of which he proved in his lab. While this discovery in itself, associated with the Newtonian concept of "the ether," was not earth-shaking, he soon ran afoul of the medical authorities when he claimed his control of the life energy, the wave-form nature of the cosmic ether, cured cancer. In 1940s America, such a proclamation was certain to be a decree of professional suicide.

Still, Reich found practical uses for his wave-form energy to control and modify weather by modulating the amount of "orgone" within a storm. Varying amounts of orgone were found to reside in biological organisms as well as in every square inch of cosmic space. By using electromagnetic force fields, Reich was ultimately able to reduce the violence of natural storms, a feat he promptly and foolishly reported to the government.

But the government had been closely following Dr. Reich's experiments and already knew what he could do. They asked for, and received, all his prototype equipment and research papers and quickly used the information to advance their own weather research.

This research combined the radio meteorograph, a balloon lofted weather monitor, with Reich's "orgone buster" and produced the devices now known as radiosondes. In the 1950s, radiosondes were lofted by balloon into the atmosphere at the rates of about 200 per day. Despite the government's cover story that the radiosondes were lofted to gather weather data, no receivers for the transmitters aboard have ever been discovered and the government was able, through a chain of disinformation, to preserve the secrecy of the weather altering devices for over forty years.

Even if radiosondes were used to nullify violent storms on the eastern seaboard, the potential exists to use them to actually create violent storms and to direct them toward specific targets, communities and factories or military bases, which research has been reported in the former Soviet Union for about thirty years.

According to investigators who have pursued weather control, the joint RAFB / USAFB Woodbridge-Bentwaters, just north of London, England, was partially

destroyed by a man-made storm. Huge tracts of lovely forest on and around the base were literally pulled out by the roots during a sudden, violent, localized storm of great intensity, a disaster which is lamented by citizens from nearby communities to this day.

Of all the mind-control experiments conducted in the 1970s and 1980s, those of the Phoenix Project produced some of the most bizarre and unexpected results. While they were primarily interested in altering the moods and behavior of test subjects, scientists at Phoenix quickly learned that they could beam specific controlled frequencies to produce specific mood changes and thought patterns.

Once they had learned this, they beamed those frequencies all over the New England area to see how they could alter the thoughts of local citizens. Those tests produced the results already discussed.

Test subjects were bombarded with many different pulse rates and bandwidths as scientists tried to determine which pulses made the person cry, laugh, sleep, violent, etc. They discovered that when the equipment was operating, the mood of everyone at the facility would change.

From this they concluded that the person did not have to be in the direct path of the beamed frequencies to be affected by the mind control pulses. Their newly found weapon of RF power gave them a virtual doorway to the human mind! Next on the agenda was to discover what was inside and how they could alter it permanently.

Unfortunately, several people died of massive brain damage during the early tests when exposed to long periods of intense pulses of microwave energy. After this problem was solved, the scientists began compiling a data base of pulses and frequencies that produced the results they were looking for and, by 1972, had developed a non-burning, non-lethal technology and began using it almost continually on military personnel and nearby communities.

A natural outcome of these experiments was changing the frequencies to see which produced the best results. From these rapid and random frequency change tests there emerged the first useful ideas and mechanics of time-tripping which would be used later to purposefully send test subjects out of this time/space continuum.

By about 1975, shortly after cessation of hostilities in Vietnam, the Phoenix Project was in full swing with computers, a comprehensive data base covering a broad range of cause and effect coordinates, and all the new, powerful transmitters they required to begin beaming their subliminal transmissions over a large area of the American Northeast.

This pulse, when it can be heard above local noise, sounds like a diesel engine running at idle about a mile away and is just at the low end of human hearing. In some areas, a pulse attributed to Soviet experiments is at a very low frequency and sounds like a "woodpecker" at the 5Hz to 8Hz range on shortwave

radios. This low pulse has been detected in the Seattle, Washington area and, most recently, in the New England area.

New technology almost always produces unimagined side-effects and Phoenix was no exception. When directed at automobiles, certain pulses could cause engines to stop running and electrical instruments to malfunction. Even animals could be agitated to do strange things. So the scientists had not only a machine that could disable automobiles and machines of war, they had, by the early 1980s, built and programmed a device that would allow them access to the human mind and achieve complete thought control over every citizen of the world. They could turn us on and off like lights, but further research was required to determine which switches needed to be on and in what order to produce the desired effect on a mass scale.

Help was already available and funds were pouring in from private and secret sources. Phoenix had a wealth of supporters, all of whom expected to reap great financial rewards from the new mind-control technology. Some contributors would gain from the manufacture and sale of the hardware and software; some would gain from sale of machines to the military; others would gain by programming consumers to purchase their advertised products and services. Apparently no one stopped to think of those who were going to lose: the people—those into whose minds the programs would be fed.

But the most important discovery was just around the corner. While they were refining the mind-reading/thought control research, the scientists would stumble onto time-tripping .

Facilities were expanded, equipment upgraded, new Cray computers fed with synthetic human blood were installed to decode the messages returning from the brains of test subjects and translators were placed into the loop to convert the electrical signals into actual pictures which could be displayed on television monitors.

The engineers, funded by some of the largest communications companies in the world, were able from that time to listen to, read and watch the thoughts of their test subjects! They could hear and see what was going on inside their minds. They could join in conversations and record running dialogues. They could vary pulses to change the test subject's mood and actually see what the effect produced.

After refinements, the translator was changed into a transmitter; that is, the thoughts of the subject, instead of being merely recorded into a data base, were going to be transmitted to other test subjects who were conducting time-tripping experiments to give them a "real time" reference to present time Earth. This reference was found to be necessary so time-trippers would not become disoriented and lost in the quantum field which might produce images vastly different from those the test subjects recently left.

But the "dreamers" or "scanners" could not always lock onto images and hold them for long periods of time and several time-trippers were lost before the "real time" images were converted to computer images that could be locked on for indefinite periods.

It was at this point and with the aid of the Cray and IBM computers and the new "virtual reality" imaging technology that time-tripping became possible without the dangers inherent in the earlier systems which used human scanners who were unable to generate continuous images to those travelling through the quantum field.

Theoretically, time moves in one direction only: forward. There are, however, very subtle shifts in time that most people cannot detect and of which only very astute and sensitive people are aware. One of these subtle shifts is the phenomena of deja vu or "second view." Another is precognition or viewing events in another time before they happen in this time.

These events are, as far as I can determine, good evidence that some people have existed in more than one time in the same lifetime and that the friends we gather here are gathered there as well. I suspect this construct would be a parallel universe since things there are as familiar as they are here, however, I am not certain in which of the realities the events actually occur first.

Once the time shifts and scan lock problems had been solved with computers and the addition and application of the Cascade Generator, the Heisenberg Variable compensator and the newly developed Steinmetz Accelerator, the scientists could conjure up a "pseudo-time" that would tie the time travellers to an Earth reality. This would keep them from getting lost and allow them to find their way back through the quantum field vortex being generated at the facility.

But, because the computers could now generate images that appeared real and solid, the scientists realized they could project or broadcast them and cause people outside the facility to believe they were actually seeing creatures and machines interacting with them. These images were particularly apparent to people who had more than normal sensory perception and, because many of those people report what they think they see, the scientists have been able to compile a small list of potential receptors (espers) who generally incorrectly translate the images and pass them on to non-sensitive people.

This mind control through intermediaries (the espers) has been actively conducted since about 1975 or 1976 and accounts for almost all reports of alien abduction other than those incidents attributed to actual abduction by military or federal intelligence agencies for medical or psychological research.

The early tests, under the cover title of "The Seeing Eye" were conducted to determine how easily espers linked with computer-generated virtual images could influence the general population. The scanner or "Scannate" projects were born of this new technology and were employed by several different intelligence

agencies during the cold war to find submarines, troop staging areas and underground facilities of the enemy. Some of them continue even now at secret bases in American western states.

The only purpose of the new technology being directed at American citizens is to load thoughts into their minds to make them do things they would not ordinarily do, including murder, suicide, madness, or purchasing items they do not want and cannot use.

By 1984, as predicted by George Orwell, Big Brother was inside our heads and we didn't even know it.

After the electromagnetic fields and computer-generated images were refined and perfected, the Phoenix Project scientists began conducting a series of comprehensive tests to determine how effective their subliminal transmission were on the general population.

By 1980 they were transmitting mental images of hairy anthropoid creatures, flying saucers and grey aliens across a large area of North America. All the while they compiled vast data bases and continuously altered frequencies and programs.

Other departments were creating storms and hurricanes and causing floods and blizzards as they perfected their weather machines to be used (they claimed) as weapons of war. We wonder, since Americans became the test subjects, against whom they intended to wage this unholy war? Most certainly from 1980 until the present time, this war has been waged against Americans.

The first hint of something new and exciting came early in 1980 when someone observed that an artificial event occurred before it was transmitted, and others were observed hours or days after they were broadcast. These astounding observations led the scientists and engineers to conclude that the broadcasts were getting lost in time and were being shifted or re-broadcast sooner or later than they should have been.

Further investigation revealed that time shifting was, indeed, occurring. By reconstructing the events and tracing the cause of the shift, they were ultimately able to isolate and control the moment and duration of the shift. They had, by accident, discovered how to manipulate or alter time.

Because their present equipment was barely adequate to fulfill the requirements of the time shifting, they requested and obtained new and more powerful electronic devices, most of which were installed and operational by 1981. By surrounding their test subjects with powerful electromagnetic fields, they were able to create the effect produced aboard the U. S. Navy destroyer escort but with a great deal more control and safety.

They had found the portal into the quantum field and began tentatively to explore it, discovering in rapid succession, null time in which all things material and ethereal exists at one and the same moment in all planes as "being" before

the creation of the manifest cosmos; negative time (past); present time; positive time (future) and proof of parallel universes also having their own past, present and future times! It was into this vast unknown quantum field the scientists intended to project their test subjects.

Immediately there were problems. The prototype Generators and Accelerators were imperfect. They were large and heavy and the knowledge of the Quantum field was far from complete at that time. People vanished and were never retrieved from the vortex. They appeared to have fallen into the rabbit hole and not found their way out again. It was from these calamities that the computer-generated links were devised. These "real time" links would serve as a lifeline for the time trippers, allowing them to find the portals so they could return to present earth time and space. It established a "zero time" or beginning and ending reference for the travellers.

During the early phase of this refinement, and because they worried about losing their trained psychics, it became routine to take homeless people from the alleys and project them into the vortex. If they were lost no one would even miss them. If they returned, they were forced to relate their adventures and then they were projected into the vortex again for additional tests. When they outlived their usefulness or if the scientists feared they might remember what happened and tell someone else, they were projected in and the computer links were shut down. Hundreds of people may have been lost in this manner.

Once the zero time and the image links were perfected and programmed into the computers, the human psychics in the loop were deemed unnecessary and they were taken out, primarily because they were unable to consistently lock in the real time images required to maintain the link between this time and "other" time. The project was now totally controlled by vast electromagnetic generators and computers, all attenuated by the Steinmetz Accelerator.

Most of the base personnel—those who had not succumbed to the project—had been transferred to other assignments. New crews arrived to guard and maintain the base. Civilian cadres were down-sized and many of the psychics were cut loose. Many of them simply disappeared.

Between 1981 and 1983 a large number of successful, if mostly tentative, excursions had been made forward and backward through time in parallel and alternate universes as well as projections back and forth in earth time. During the trips back into earth time, a number of significant historic political events were altered, some purposefully, others quite accidentally. They explored the vortex in Earth's past and future, sampling air and water and observing the evolution of society and the loss of natural resources, altering those events that would have caused natural or man-made disasters in the future. These alterations have bent the earth's time line and forced it out of its original direction and chronology. Those of us living since 1983 are not the people we would have become had not the

time-trippers altered our time/space.

Because the transmitter could be tuned to any point or time, travellers were often projected into parallel universes and into past, present and future time. The early vortex jumps were described by test subjects as being a twisted tunnel, brightly lit and having branches and side tunnels. They described their trips, their missions and their return trips, most of which resulted in nausea, disorientation and, infrequently, in madness. After the Steinmetz Accelerator had been refined into the device we have today, stabilizing the electromagnetic field surrounding the Cascade Generator, time jumping occurred instantly. One simply appeared where one cared to be without the effects of moving or falling or passage of time.

It is interesting to note that, while hours or even months might pass while they were performing tasks in the alternate or parallel time, the trippers almost always returned to nearly the exact moment they left Earth's real time. To the casual observer, they would have appeared not to have gone anywhere at all!

"There was not," claimed one scientist, "more than a slight wavering of light rays to indicate the test jumpers had gone into the vortex. They reappeared, after having performed tasks for weeks, in the next second."

The project, sophisticated as it was by 1983, was not without danger. More than one tripper was abandoned in the vortex when power fluctuated or was lost. Still, both volunteers and conscripts, all males between the ages of 16 and 24 years, and in the total number of perhaps ten thousand, were being lofted into the vortex on a daily basis, many of them equipped with transmitting devises that could send messages and images back to the test facility, and many others with mining and survival equipment. A large number of these trippers did not return to present day earth and it is to be assumed that theirs was a one-way mission through time. They were not expected to return and, indeed, must have agreed not to.

From this revelation, many are led to conclude that the trippers were sent through the vortex to terraform a distant planet or, perhaps, to colonize a near celestial body such as the moon or Mars.

Several sources have indicated that manned excursions were made on Mars as early as 1962 and there is some evidence to suggest that the first large group of colonists were lofted to the Martian and lunar surfaces by the Q-Tech group using their time/space altering technology. Something is certainly going on up there!

To understand time, one must remember that "time" as a thing does not actually exist. "Time" is the orderly progression of events occurring only in the mind of the observer and only within the limits of the particular universe in which they are manifest. These same (or similar) events may also occur at the same moment in a parallel universe. If the observer was projected suddenly into the parallel universe, he might not even be aware that a shift had occurred, except that he might experience some vertigo or an episode of deja vu. Generally these episodes are nullified with a shake of the head or a shrug of the shoulders.

The observer appears to be in his own real time and continues with his life as if he were. He is totally unaware that a time shift occurred or that he was momentarily in the vortex. These sudden and unexplained shifts may have no direct impact on one's future. On the other hand, they may have profound effects on all of humankind, for the act of changing the time line of a single person is tantamount to changing everyone's time line. The alternate future, once established, becomes fixed until or unless someone goes into the vortex to tamper with it again.

Because the time line has already been altered, first accidentally with the Navy Experiment and then purposefully during the Phoenix Project, we find ourselves in a time lock in which everything appears to be progressing normally but is, in fact, progressing through altered time. Events are getting away from us. Our control over normal chores diminishes. Events occur for which there are no logical answers. The weather has gone haywire. People have gone mad and the prisons are full to overflowing. We've jumped sideways and are having trouble finding our way back to 1943.

Currently, travel into past time guarantees that the shifter will arrive at the desired destination or specific point in "time" (which for all practical purposes no longer exists).

If no contact is made during the shift, return to the present may occur without incident. If, however, events of the past are altered, the voyager may only return to a present which his actions have created.

"Again," says Dr. Bergen, "the person who returns is not the same person who was lofted into the Quantum field. He or she may appear to be the same person, but we can spot them quickly because normal events are often impossible for them to grasp. They seem awkward and stupid at times, and often cannot explain what they are doing or even understand why they are doing it. They seem to be unrecognized by former family members and friends. They also complain of ghostly influences and heightened ESP."

That the alteration of history (time) occurs only for the shifter, as the Russians have proposed, is completely false. The act of altering one person's time line will alter everyone's time line, even if minutely.

Those who are unaware of the shift continue through slightly altered history every time a shift occurs, and may experience nothing more than an episode of temporary memory loss.

But the shifter will forever be unable to return to the time he left and will dwell, until his death, in a time shift known as a parallel world, even if he manages to loft elsewhere.

Clearly, if Einstein really did destroy his equations and manuscripts in 1943 after the ill-fated Navy Experiment (which we suspect he did not), he did it because he realized the dangers time shifting posed to a world that is engaged in a major war about every ten years!

"What if," Dr. Bergen speculated, "someone were to place an atomic bomb with all the instructions to build others into a time machine and loft it back to Tokyo, Japan in 1936? What if someone were to send a modern fully armored Army division back to the time of the Crusades? Or what if a single person slipped through the Quantum field and gave Gengis Khan the means to manufacture the Gatling gun? We would not be here discussing this problem, don't you see?"

No airplane, no rocket, no satellite can find or track you through the Quantum field, at least not yet. No bullet can follow you through time. No other person can exactly match your course through time, although many can travel at the same moment to the same point in time/space (the sole function of the "flying saucer," according to some.)

Those who individually loft after you find themselves in a slightly altered moment. You may be there but, again, you may not.

Early on, it appeared that teams must shift together or they might become separated in the vortex. An undisclosed number of volunteers have simply vanished and no one can find them because no one knows where to look (re: The Copperfield Project). Currently, however, the addition of the Heisenberg Variable Compensator and the Steinmetz Accelerator to the Cascade Generator has stabilized the field indefinitely and has allowed many subjects to jump to the same general location at different times, even days or years later.

Sources who investigated the East Coast military base conducting time shifting tests at the close of the 1960s say that the number of volunteers lost may have been as great as one thousand, however, the number is generally agreed to be no more than 300. In any event, the loss is tragic.

Those whose business it is to watch and listen for signs of time travel experiments have reported that information, once candidly discussed and traded internationally, has all but dried up or is being received as clear misinformation.

Scientists, engineers and researchers here in the West, fear that the military, and more probably the Central Intelligence Agency and The Office of Naval Intelligence, has clamped a lid of secrecy on the tests. This suggests to observers that something significant is afoot, particularly since one prominent magazine publishing the reports may be jointly controlled by the CIA and the former KGB.

Unconfirmed reports have come from Russian UFOlogists that the Red Army has built, tested and successfully flown a disk-shaped craft propelled by a Cascade Generator. This type of machine is not an aircraft in the accepted sense; it is wholly and clearly a time shifter.

Aircraft are designed to operate in Earth's atmosphere or, at best, in suborbital flight, and do not need (indeed cannot properly function with) electromagnetic engines.

Russian machines (UFOs), like those of the West, are time shifter translocators. They were designed for that purpose and that is the function they

fulfill.

"Nothing else," says Midori Severi, "explains why or how UFOs appear to flash off or whisk away in the blink of an eye. They are not flying away; they are shifting backward or forward or sideways in time/space. When you stop to think about it, it is an extremely efficient method of moving from place to place or from one time to another."

The "charge" around UFOs that have been observed and approached on the ground are further evidence, if not proof, that the Generator is constantly renewing itself from its own motion, even when the craft itself is parked.

Unverifiable reports have labelled America's current time-shift experiments Prussian Blue, Indigo Blue and Protean Light. These code names may indicate that more than one project is underway and that several avenues of shifting are being examined.

The codes names may also indicate which organization is conducting the experiments. If past code names are any indication, Protean Light is probably a project being conducted by a California Corporation for the U. S. Navy.

Readers may imagine that those scientists and engineers are titanic humans wrestling with titanic problems to create titanic devices, but this is a rather parochial viewpoint. Most engineers working on the projects are rather ordinary people; some, in fact, are inordinately common.

"They work with known scientific principles toward specific goals. Except that the goal is time shifting (as opposed to physical space flight), the research is straightforward and, for the most part, uninteresting," Midori Severi reported.

According to the Russian report, their time shifter was developed with volunteer help from engineers at the Moscow Aviation Institute, the Krunichev Aerospace plant, and the design bureaus of Salyut and Energiya. All of these companies now have some joint interest and contracts with the U. S. space industry for production of space craft, space craft components and parts, orbiting space stations, hovercraft, other ships, and aircraft.

It would be naive of us to believe that these industrial giants would volunteer their time and efforts to help a science editor design, build and test a time shifter when their own financial purposes and rewards would be better served by designing and testing real time shifters to replace those noisy, expensive, bulky and cranky rocket motors being used to loft payloads into orbit around the various inner planets.

"We suspect," says Midori Severi, "that is exactly what they are doing behind the scenes while KGB pumps out nonsense and misinformation about their time machines."

During the 1950s and 1960s, and perhaps into the mid-1970s, U. S. and Soviet military and intelligence agency efforts were directed primarily at time-tripping with the use of psychics, espers, remote viewers and even fortune tellers,

however, a whole series of experiments, classified as time shifting or time jumping, were (and still are) conducted at several locations in both countries.

The results of those early tests were used to develop the machines some people incorrectly call UFOs to loft teams into the Quantum field. These teams include scientists, engineers, labor forces and military security forces whose joint mission is to either terraform the planets they find, or to vanquish and claim lands inhabited by other life forms.

Whispered information indicates that these teams have agreed to go on a one-way trip; they are not expected to return to present earth time/space.

The Copperfield Project was "officially" discontinued in 1968 or 1969, however, that does not necessarily mean that the project was cancelled or forgotten. The U. S. military, and particularly the CIA, does not spend a zillion dollars on research and then walk away and leave it, even if the resulting data are niggling.

A time shifter which could be built and made operational would literally change the entire way life on earth is lived; everything would begin to proceed through nonlinear time where there may be tens of thousands of solutions or destinations for any single problem or journey one might have.

"To state it categorically," Dr. Bergen says, "when you get up in the morning, you might or might not find yourself in the bed, or house, or even the same world in which you fell asleep. If you do, you may trek off to work and arrive twenty years before you were born or fifty centuries after you open the door. Once the chain of nonlinear events begins in earnest, we simply will be unable to stop it or return to the beginning. Do not pass go, do not collect one hundred dollars. No one will know where the beginning point is; it will have ceased to exist. That is nonlinear time."

But would not nonlinear time drive us all insane (assuming that we can call the present system of political, economic and legal madness "sane")? What would we do to earn a living if we thought we might not arrive at our office once we stepped outside the relative shelter of our homes?

How might we react if we came home to find that thirty years had elapsed since we left the office and that the family we thought we had bid farewell to in the morning was not even alive on this planet anymore?

What do we do if we walk around the corner and see before us Hannibal's army and an host of lumbering elephants on their way to conquer new lands, including ours?

How could we manage if we arise some fine Saturday morning to discover that some fool lofted himself into the past to capture the one female who was the common ancestor of all modern humans? What if we stare into the mirror (assuming there are any) to discover that we are still hairy little anthropoids scrubbing about in the brambles for grubs and rodents?

What then shall we do?

You can bet that if the federal governments of the former Soviet Union and the former Constitutional Republic of America have been visited by time shifters lofting back from the future, they wouldn't tell you and me.

Instead, they would devise a program of misinformation, disinformation and debunking to convince the public that anyone who sees or reports a strange flying vehicle or aerial car, or experiences some odd extrasensory event, is a lunatic who should be trundled up and trucked off to a sanitarium.

But doesn't it seem reasonable to believe that once an event occurs, nothing anyone can later do will cause the event not to have occurred?

Once something happens, it remains an "event" even if "time" passes it by. The Pilgrims sailed to the shores of North America. The Spanish murdered millions of people in North and South America and every little island and mountaintop in between. Settlers trekked West to open the prairies and coast of North America. The whole world fought the Second War. The Roman Legions destroyed the Temple.

"These are historical facts, however, in nonlinear time, the Jews may have repelled the Romans and saved the Temple, you see," says Erich Brumley, writer for Lights In The Sky newsletter.

And in a parallel world, the Nazis may have won the Second War (or they may have won the First War, making the Second War unnecessary). In a parallel world, in nonlinear time, humans may never have evolved at all; dinosaurs or massive rodents might be the dominant life forms.

In another parallel world, humanlike animals might evolve but might never develop the capacity to think more progressively than present earth primates. They might not have airplanes, for instance, or trains, or instruments of war. But they might not have commercial institutions, either.

Since we will never be informed of these parallel worlds or time shifting events that will impact our lives, we must be vigilant, always looking for odd, enigmatic episodes that make no apparent sense and for which there appears to be no logical answers. When these "events" begin to occur with greater frequency, that should serve to raise the red warning flag. Perhaps we're already seeing some of these events. Increased sightings of UFOs and TLOs worldwide are a real danger signal that time is being manipulated and controlled. Time will begin to "speed up," then will appear to "slow down."

Espers will begin to experience vastly increased extrasensory images from both the past and the future. Prophets will appear to tell us what the future holds in store for us (they will have been lofted into their own Quantum field and arrived in ours). Other prophets will declare that they are the one true God and that we must follow them into a brave new world.

Politicians will go mad for want of power and prestige. Lawyers will scramble like hyenas for the remaining scraps of property abandoned by a society driven

insane by nonlinear events. Eventually, someone will decide that enough is enough and lift the protecting cover on the big red button.

The target year for nonlinear time shifting is 2025, but we suspect—as do many others—that the shift to nonlinear time will probably occur sooner than that, perhaps as early as the year 2006.

Rocket travel to the moon was ridiculed as complete nonsense in a 1920s editorial in the New York Times. But we know it is possible to go to the moon. How do we know? Because we have done it. It was known in the early part of this century that it was feasible; people just had to be sufficiently clever to make use of the laws of physics. So it is with time travel. The laws of physics permit it and I believe we must accept that it is possible.

Our generation is on the brink of a brave new world and our generation will have the most difficulty dealing with it. We are at a turning point which will see the creation and perfection of mass time travel devices.

History is replete with turning points, some splendid, some dreadful, but this time-space unfolds ceaselessly exactly as it should. Perhaps we should neither rejoice nor despair over a future which increasingly slips from our grasp. If it doesn't work out the way we planned, we can always go back and do it again, a kind of eternal and ageless reincarnation until we either get it right or give up trying. Religious scholars have been telling us for centuries that's the way it is anyhow. Time travel may simply prove them right.

In 1943, after the ill-fated Navy Experiment, sailors who survived the four-hour journey into time would begin to smoulder and burn from the inside out (spontaneous combustion) in exactly the same manner that food is cooked in a microwave oven.

This is evidence, if not proof, that those sailors were projected here—perhaps displaced—from a parallel world, and that the harmonics and electromagnetic structure of this world fatally interfered with their cellular structure.

The prescribed 'cure' for this burning was a laying on of hands. When a sailor would begin to smoulder, his comrades would touch him—lay on hands—and this act apparently would disrupt or nullify the harmful harmonics that were occurring at that moment.

According to a 1964 manuscript describing the Phoenix Project, there were ultimately no survivors of the experiment; all either died immediately, died later of the burning, or simply vanished before the eyes of startled witnesses.

A Norfolk, Virginia newspaper account tells of a sailor who walked through the wall of a bar but never appeared on the other side. He apparently returned to the Quantum field or to his own world. We may never know.

Physicists who were working on the problem of time travel described a machine that is a massive rotating cylinder or ovate ellipsoid (flying saucer). The rotation of the cylinder produces time dilation so one may travel to the past, or

time compression so one may travel to the future.

Others have suggested that a stationary machine has already been devised that produces time alteration by creating a rapidly spinning electromagnetic field (as inside a large electric motor) and that anything inside that field or affected by it, may be projected forward or backward through time.

In other words, the massive machine is no longer required; a rather small device (perhaps no larger than a telephone booth) produces the same results to loft a single person or other test subject into the Quantum field.

Protean Light has been described as "...two cylinders, approximately two meters and three meters in diameter, rotating in opposite directions at controlled speeds to produce time alteration in a very controlled manner."

The electrical field generated is such that the cost of operating the machine is prohibitive at this time. Resolution of that problem apparently consumes a large portion of the budget appropriated for the project.

Perfection of Time Machines will create some serious problems for humankind. A tyrannical government could (and would) use the devices to eliminate not only enemies from other nations, but every one of their own citizens who did not share their political beliefs. They could loft tens of thousands of men, women and children into the Quantum field and shut off the power or alter events so that no one would have the motivation or resources to resist their fascist police state.

More than a few who have researched the idea of time travel believe such manipulation is already beginning; that we are now living in a world that has been altered to benefit a privileged oligarchy at the expense of the masses.

Some researchers insist this occurred as a result of time travel into the future so the past could be altered forever. Plutocrats know how the future will unfold because they create it with a continuing program of time manipulation.

The greatest problem with time alteration is that, once altered, time can never be restored. We can never go back to the beginning because the beginning no longer exists for us. It is a page torn from the book of life and discarded. Every time we try to begin reading the story again, we find it has changed. The characters appear to be the same but the plot has been altered. Events unfold in a completely different way than they would have done had not the manipulation occurred.

The greater problem is that most of humanity is not even aware that time and events have been altered; that is the nature of time travel and parallel worlds. Everything seems perfectly normal; everything seems to be progressing as it should. Only a few sensitives, and certainly the researchers, are aware that something is amiss, that something has changed, or that something appears to be out of whack, and perhaps that understanding will be enough to allow them to constantly adjust to altered time.

Skeptics often base arguments against the existence of UFOs and time travel

on an abstract concept perched atop theories Albert Einstein proposed decades before Kenneth Arnold's 1947 sighting catapulted flying saucers over the West's wall of arrogance and denial and smack into public consciousness. It's called the "velocity-of-light speed limit."

Einstein said that as an object accelerated toward the speed of light (about 300,000 kilometers per second), its mass would increase, its length in the direction of travel would decrease, and its time would dilate. The rates of these changes are negligible at "ordinary" speeds like that of our Apollo spacecraft, but approach infinity if one approaches very close to light speed.

Some physicists interpret this to mean no object can exceed light speed. They assume that, as the mass of an object increases toward infinity, the amount of thrust (and therefore the weight of the fuel) required to accelerate it also increases toward infinity. Building on this arbitrary foundation, they assume extraterrestrial spacecraft visiting Earth would have to come from within a radius of 54 light years. And since there are only 46 stars similar to our sun within that radius, they do not believe we could be visited by the huge number of craft that have been reported. (Dr. Jacques Vallee once estimated that UFOs may have effected three million landings on Earth.)

Such conclusions may be justified, or they may be modern versions of "If man were meant to fly, God would have given him wings," and "Human beings will never be able to break the sound barrier and live." But if the hypothesis I propose is correct, the velocity-of-light question may be irrelevant.

(Indeed, our refinement of Dr. Steinmetz's Accelerator has allowed us to increase transfer of subjects through the space/time field by a factor of three hundred) R.T.

Einstein's theories also state that space and time are interdependent; that together they form a four-dimensional continuum; that the presence of matter warps the space-time continuum: and that the greater the mass, the greater the curvature. Recently, we have learned that "black holes"—gravity wells created when massive stars collapse—form "singularities." They warp space-time so much that it actually turns inside-out and time runs backward.

This field would, in effect, create an artificial "wormhole", a private universe that the craft could carry around the way a water spider carries a bubble of air. Inside it, the craft would be isolated from normal space-time. By manipulating the size, shape and strength of the field, the beings aboard the craft may be able to fold space-time instead of traveling through it to a distant location. This method may allow them to travel from other planets, stars, galaxies, dimensions (parallel universes), the past and future, even from the places we go when we dream and die—all as easily as we drive to market.

They may appear as if they are traveling through thick atmosphere and performing instantaneous hairpin turns at thousands of miles per hour without

burning up or making any noise, materializing, disappearing, etc, because time inside the field is entirely different from time outside it. Such a field would likely cause distortions not only of space and time, but of gravity, sound, light, heat, magnetism, even direction. And such effects have been documented time and again throughout the history of Earth.

Once we open our minds to these possibilities, some vexing problems evaporate. Such a method as I have described here could conceivably allow almost instantaneous travel to and from not just other planets in our own solar system, but distant stars and even distant galaxies. New concepts of physics do not preclude traveling at literally millions of times the speed of light. It could also allow easy travel to and from our own future and our own past (and, therefore, to and from the futures and pasts of other planets, etc.). It could even make possible travel to and from other dimensions (universes), perhaps even including the place our electric souls go when we die.

* * * * *

There Raymond's essay abruptly ended and it had done nothing more than convince me that time machines, and particularly the one in my shirt pocket, should be tossed into the lake. But it was also clear that time machines had been developed, for Raymond had gone into the future of one Earth or another to obtain the one he had given me. What had happened in this Earth timeline was fixed and would remain so until someone went into the vortex to tamper with it again. But the new reality, if Raymond's essay was correct, would apply only to the alternate universe. Perhaps the time machine did not exist in the original Earth timeline and, perhaps, it never would. But it existed in the Earth timeline in which I was living and it appeared that I was stuck with it.

Now it was up to me to decide how I should use it. I was chagrined to learn the first thought to come into my mind was to go forward two days in time to see what the winning lottery numbers would be for nearly fifty-four million dollars. I manipulated the keys, found myself in an alley near a liquor store in the village, replaced the time machine into my pocket and walked in. I looked at the winning numbers displayed above the counter, walked back to the alley, then went back in time one day.

"Hi," I said, smiling largely at the clerk. "I'd like to buy a lottery ticket."

Before I left for San Diego next day, I drove a half mile up the mountain and knocked on Olivia Perkins' door.

"This is the winner," I said. "Instructions are on the back."

And I am dumb to tell a weather's wind
How time has ticked a heaven round the stars
Dylan Thomas

NINE

It was clear from Raymond's brief that his reasons for developing the time shift machine were not simply to travel back and forth in time, but to go to specific eras and specific places to determine if targeted planets were populated by sentient beings. If it was Raymond's agenda, I concluded it was also the agendas of Future Industries and the government; particularly the military.

And since it was most likely their agenda to discover inhabited planets in the far fields of space, it was not a great leap of imagination to conclude all those engineers and politicians would be keen to turn the technology into a formidable weapon to subject any recalcitrant aliens to their will and power. It is the way politicians and soldiers earn their livings.

It was also clear that development of a time shifter had been in the mill for at least six decades and in prototype production by a number of companies for a minimum of twenty years. Had they really lost three hundred people trying to refine their machines? The very thought was chilling. Where had all those people gone? Were they floating in some nightmare limbo or had they separately fallen to the surfaces of alien planets to wander lost and frightened for the rest of their lives? Would they reappear in our future or had they lived and died in bewildered fear somewhere in Earth's past?

The brief stated that one's timeline changed ever so slightly every time he or she jumped through time. We couldn't come back to exactly the same timeline, according to Raymond and others who had contributed to the abstract. Something must change, however minutely, even if the jump is only for a few seconds.

What had changed in my timeline? I had jumped three times and the only thing I noticed was that I could not remember events and people until I was reminded of them, and then I could remember them only vaguely. It was disconcerting but not debilitating. So far, I could live with those things. But I knew I was going to have to focus my attention on events and people somewhat more intensely or I might lose my grip on reality completely.

I had scanned through the section on military problem solving when I read the instructions and had found, but not read, a section concerning "Regenesis." That section, at second look, described a resident program that recalled all events that occurred in the jumper's timeline in segments of seventy-two hours prior to the last transfer. That's how Raymond was able to remember me and all the events that had occurred since we had met.

I enabled the program and watched those events unfold on the screen. Clever and extremely useful, indeed. There was Raymond and Monica, Court and Ironsmith. Olivia Perkins and the lottery ticket.

Slick, this Regenesis thing. It will come in handy.

But if I thought the reminder was going to make life any easier, I had to think again. I imagined going home, packing a few things and driving away to some

remote forest so I could study the time shifter and make a few furtive jumps off the planet. I had driven thirty miles before I realized I didn't know where I was going; I even thought I might be going north rather than south toward San Diego so I turned off the freeway at the next exit and got my bearings. I was quite confused. How could I not remember how to get back home? Then I began to wonder exactly where home was and what the house looked like. I tried to picture it but could not. I was lost and I began to panic. Life had suddenly become a series of uncontrolled and disconnected vignettes. I was alive and knew I was alive, but I was completely disconnected from anything that was occurring around me. I was a stranger in a strange land. An alien on an alien planet.

The Regenesis program provided the answer. I replayed the last three segments of its recordings until I could recall my present Earth timeline. I turned the motorhome around and headed south toward San Diego, still shaken by the frightening events. I was surprised that I had even remembered the Regenesis program was recording my life.

I desperately needed to get home, unload the motorhome, then escape somewhere so I could get the broken pieces of my life back together. I needed some time alone so I could make some decisions about the time shifter and what role I was playing at the moment. It was not to be. Monica Dodd was waiting for me.

She was on the porch, rocking gently in the swing and reading Robert Frost poems. She finished the poem she was reading, glanced at her watch, then looked up at me. I expected her to say that I was late.

"So, you made it," she said. "Did you get lost?"

"I did." But how, I wondered, did she know?

"I did, too, the first three or four times, but after they plugged in the programs that connected us to this timeline, it became easier."

"You jumped?" That's how she knew.

"I was one of the first one hundred government employees sanctioned as test subjects. I don't know what kind of thing you have, Richard, but the device we were using ten years ago was scary. It was noisy and loud and dangerous. I was just a kid. Let's go inside, shall we?"

She led the way, replaced the book on the shelf in the living room and sat in my favorite chair. She told me about the experiments in which she had been involved and it was much like Raymond's brief, except they seemed not to be able to actually complete many of their transfers. Those they had completed yielded no satisfactory results.

"That's why we were hoping Raymond's machine would work. We need to discover how he is coming and going with such ease. Would you share your secret with me?"

I took the time machine from my pocket and placed it on the table. Her

eyebrows went up a half inch.

"This?" she asked.

"That." said I.

"My God."

"Mine, too."

"This is the Wheel of Heaven," she whispered.

"The Wheel... ?"

"...of Heaven. We can go anywhere, into any timeline and return unscathed. Tell me how you got it."

For the next twenty minutes I went through the entire story of Judson Templeton, the Cascade Generator, Raymond's time machines, the worthless tank at Future Industries, and the last two days on the mountain. I played back the recordings so she could see us at cabin, stopped it before I bought the lottery ticket.

"I wish we had had this ten years ago when I was getting lost in the quantum field. How did Raymond make it?"

"He didn't. He used his laptop model to travel into the future to steal it. Someone in a parallel world probably went to prison for it."

"It would have been Raymond."

"What?"

"It was the parallel Raymond who stole it and who would have gone to prison if he was caught. That's the only way it can work."

I wondered if Raymond knew that, decided he probably did.

"How much of what we read and see on television is true about time travel?" I asked.

"Depends." she replied. "Are you familiar with the Philadelphia Experiment?"

"Not completely, but some of it."

"Well, it's true. Not the sensationalized part of it. Not the movie version, but the Navy actually lost their ship for a few hours and when it reappeared it had translocated to Norfolk, Virginia. Some of the... ."

"Why did the men who were serving in the ship deny that the event ever occurred?" I interrupted.

"Because they believed it didn't. They couldn't remember because they believed they did not transfer. As far as they knew, nothing happened. When you jump, when I jump, we can't remember having jumped. We know something happened but we can't remember it. We can't remember coming back. We can't remember where we live or how to drive home, see?"

"So they just couldn't remember having made the jump?"

"Right," Monica said, somewhat sadly I thought. "Because the ship and crew returned to Philadelphia harbor. But if they had remained in Norfolk, they would have known something very strange had happened. Because the ship reappeared

at the point of origin during the second jump, the sailors who survived couldn't remember that anything untoward had occurred. They didn't know it at the time, but all their timelines had changed. They were not really in the same Earth that they had left, and they also cannot remember that they had jumped forward ten years, then backward ten years to the point of origin in Philadelphia harbor."

I reflected on that for some time, shook my head and put the time machine back into my pocket. Monica watched me covetously.

"You'll have to go get your own," I said. "I believe it was in the year 2023."

"I'd have to use your shifter to do it," she said. "Will you loan it to me? I could be back in a second."

I handed it to her, explained how to set the time.

The light waves around her trembled slightly.

She handed it back.

In her left hand was an identical time shifter.

Had I not known what she had done, I would not have realized she was gone.

"For three days," she explained. "It was right where Raymond told you it would be but I had a little bit of trouble getting into the building."

It never occurred to me at the time that she might have taken a hundred of them, or a thousand, and delivered them to her colleagues at D.I.C.E.

"You seem to understand it so well," I said presently. "Can you tell me how it works? This Quantum field thing?"

"We call it the Quantum field, but it isn't a field at all. The universes are not in a field like we think of a field, a broad expanse of space and time filled with planets and stars and debris. Our universe, all that we think we know and see, speaking metaphorically, is more like a soap bubble on the surface of a thin sheet of latex. The latex sheet is bending and warping and stretching and folding. Expanding and contracting. Twisting and turning. The soap bubble bends and turns with it. But the bubble is not a sphere; it is more like a dome. Round on one side but the shape of the sheet of latex on the other.

"We live on the surface of the soap bubble. The entire known cosmos is contained on the surface of the soap bubble, both inside and out. Sometimes we pass from the inside of the bubble to the outside and back again. We are generally unaware that this event occurs. Some people—sensitives—suspect that we translocate once in awhile but they cannot control it.

"Now think of our little planet and imagine that it is on a rubber band that is imbedded into the surface of the soap bubble so that we only see one half of it. We believe both ends are attached to the soap bubble. It bends and warps and stretches and contracts but it cannot escape the surface of the soap bubble which cannot escape the surface of the latex sheet. All of this is contained within a greater, vastly immense—as we can understand it—field of innumerable latex sheets having their own soap bubbles and rubber bands.

"On the other side of our latex sheet is the opposite half of our soap bubble and on the opposite surface of the bubble are the mirror halves of the rubber bands. A reverse, mirror image of our universe. Parallel timelines, if you will, into which we can now project ourselves with the aid of this." She held up her shifter and marvelled at it.

"The Wheel of Heaven," I whispered to myself. "The Wheel of Death, more likely."

"But we know there are countless other universes and soap bubbles and rubber bands trembling beyond our tiny sheet of latex. Some are multiples; there are several bubbles clinging to the latex sheet. They overlap and create complex forms, especially where they connect. Look at soap bubbles where they connect, especially if there are ten or twenty. Each bubble is interrupted where they meet. Very complex structures are created in these connections. There are no complete domes anywhere and the reflections on the opposite side are identical but in mirror image. If you were to jump into one of those complex structures, you would go mad before you could find your way out. We lost hundreds of volunteers before we realized that we could not always shift into them."

So Raymond's paper had revealed the truth. They had lost people but didn't even know why or how.

"You've known all along that Raymond was jumping back and forth in time. Why did you not know where he had gone?"

"We just don't have the technology. Well, we didn't until now." She tapped the shifter on the table before her. "The Regenesis program will let us track anyone who shifts from this point on."

"Is that what you're going to use it for?" I asked, concerned that I had given the police state the ultimate bloodhound.

"Not I. But someone will figure it out soon enough."

"Then don't let them have it."

She squinched up her eyes. "You don't get it, do you?" she asked. "It has already been done in our future. We can't stop it or change it significantly. If we could change it or prevent it, Raymond could not have gone to the future to get your shifter and I could not have got this one. The Regenesis program is proof that someone in our future is using it as a tracking device as well as using it to connect their soldiers to Earth's timeline so they don't all come back raving fools having no memory of what they had done. Can you imagine a division of soldiers muddling around in the future or past, or even the present with no idea of what they were supposed to accomplish? Why send them in the first place?"

Yes, why send them at all, I thought; said instead, "I see."

"I think you don't see," Monica smiled disarmingly.

"Someone must have shifted into one of the complex universes you described earlier; the multiple soap bubble universes," I said. "And they came back.

Or you wouldn't know about them. If everyone got stuck there, you wouldn't even know they exist. Right?"

"Not right," she said. "We are only theorizing about complex structures. We are not sure they exist, but they must."

I knew right then she was lying to me. I even felt reasonably certain that she had shifted into one of the complex universes and had come back to reveal it. Again, I said, "I see."

We sat in silence for several seconds, each of us lost in our own secret thoughts.

Presently, I looked at her and asked, "So, what do we do now?"

"I think," she said after some reflection, "that your tenure with your present timeline has nearly expired and that you should find an exit from it."

"What does that mean?"

"In simplest terms it means that someone will come to kill you as soon as they feel they can secure your shifter."

"Court and Ironsmith?"

"No. It will be someone you do not know. He or she will approach you in broad daylight, on the street or in a building, jab you with a needle and walk away with the shifter as if nothing had happened. Moments later, you will drop dead."

"And you," said I. "Has your tenure expired as well?"

"Presumably."

I asked her again what she thought we should do. She only shook her head and pursed her lips. The question I wanted to ask was if she would be the person who would kill me. Now that she had a shifter which she could simply hand over to her employer, they did not need mine. They could now go into the future to steal as many as they wished, or they could back engineer it and manufacture them by the tens of thousands. They didn't need me or my shifter. I asked why they thought they had to kill me.

"You know too much about it."

"Don't you suppose they would torture me until I also told them you had one?"

"I am certain of it. It is precisely why you should find a way out of this timeline."

"I wouldn't know where to go or how far to be away from anyone who might have designs upon my life. Where are you going?"

Her eyebrows went up again and she studied me for a moment. Presently she smiled again and placed the shifter into her purse. "Some years ago," she said, "my brother, Sean, was projected into the past and was lost. That was when the labs were using the first crude shifters. I'm going after him. I'm going to bring him back."

"But, how do you know where to search?"

She looked away, toward the window. "I have a source inside the research facility who was kind enough to copy the codes they used fifteen years ago. All I have to do—when I am properly equipped to do it—is punch in the same codes and go after him."

"Where do you think he is?" I asked with growing curiosity.

"They sent him to Montana to examine the world as it was sixty-five million years ago, before the KT event."

The hair on the back of my neck bristled and I stared at her with wide eyes. "Monica," I said, "Montana was full of dinosaurs sixty-five million years ago!"

She nodded solemnly. "Interesting, yes? How would you like to join us?"

The Secret
Roll on, roll on forever,
Thou Wheel of Death and Birth
Build up another Heaven,
Spread out another Earth,
Where men may reap the harvest
Of deeds done ill or well,
Scoop out a place of torment,
Hollow another Hell
Lift to the heights or hurl me
Sheer down the steep abyss;
I shall not laugh for that,
I shall not weep for this.
Who knows this wondrous secret
Has naught to seek or shun;
That the pain of the Wheel of Death and Birth
And Nirvana's peace are one.
(Sangharakshita)

TEN

No one bothered me for three weeks and I began to think that Monica's warnings had no merit, that the agency was content to pursue their attempts to rejuvenate the massive tank they had moved to Akron, Ohio and had forgotten about me. I was wrong, of course, but it would take the threat of a disaster to bring me to my senses.

Monica Dodd arrived unannounced on the eleventh of August to confide that she had assembled a team of willing ex-GIs to accompany her on her trek into the misty forests of prehistoric time and to ask again if I wanted to join the expedition to find her brother, reminding me that I was nearly out of time and that a decision was required before they translocated on the thirteenth of August, only

two days hence.

"I think your expedition is not going to succeed," I said. "And even if you do find the exact time and location that he was sent, you and all your chums are not coming back, either."

"Why do you think so?" she asked.

"Because you are going to a place and time—if you actually make such a distant translocation—where very large carnivores will have you all for breakfast before you can unpack your guns, that's why."

"Well, you can stay here and face the people who are coming after you, or you can come with us and participate in the adventure of a lifetime."

"Besides," I continued, still lost in my own conversation, "what makes you think you are not going to materialize in a steaming Cretaceous lake or ocean?"

"We've chosen our location with some precision. Our navigator is certain we will translocate to a forested plateau where... ."

"Navigator? Navigator? You have a navigator? What makes you think... ? The earth has changed in ways you cannot imagine in the last sixty-five million years. There was no moon. Most, if not all, of Montana was under a shallow tropical sea. The continents hadn't separated. You're going to drown and forty-foot long crocodiles will eat your carcasses."

"We know what we're doing," she said abruptly.

"Monica," I pleaded, "Miss Dodd, I submit that you haven't the vaguest idea what you are about to do. Jumping back and forth in time, so far back, even with these Shifters, will be pushing the limits of technology to say nothing of the limits to the human psyche. I can't believe that, even twenty years from now, the technology will be good enough to do it without errors or without the risk of injury or death."

She stood with her fists clenched on her hips and glared at me. "You've jumped both ways in the past couple of weeks and you're okay. I don't see any... ."

"Monica, shifting forward a day or two or an hour or two isn't the same as shifting back sixty-five million years to a place where there were no people to even measure time. What if time isn't the same thing there as here? What if, because no humans have looked upon that world, that it will be so alien that we cannot exist there?"

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning, what if the cosmic mind sees our encroachment into that world as a nightmare and wakes up, or something."

"Cosmic mind? Are you talking about God? Do you think this is all a dream in the mind of some cosmic dreamer?"

"That doesn't seem any more preposterous than our being here on this planet at this time in this space."

"You're impossible," she huffed.

"But I am practical."

"To the verge of madness." She paced the floor, all the way into the kitchen where she fetched a bottle of water from the refrigerator. When she returned to stare out the window her eyes were dark and melancholic.

"If the technology was no good, why would someone be manufacturing the Shifters by the thousands? Would they do that if they couldn't use them for anything and everything?" she asked.

"I don't know, Monica. I really don't. I just have a bad feeling about this and it won't go away just because you're going to make me feel guilty for not wanting to help you find your brother. If he's still alive. If we jump to the same location or the same planet. Or the same time."

"But I have the codes. I know where to jump." she said petulantly.

"Sure you do. Codes. Numbers on a piece of paper that you think you can transfer to a time machine so we can translocate sixty-five million year into the past. Have you ever heard of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle?"

"No."

"Well, the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle states that the movement of particles in the Quantum field cannot be predicted with any degree of certainty. They may move in a certain direction at a certain speed ninty-nine percent of the time and suddenly one percent of the time some of the particles may go somewhere else. They may end up on the other side of the universe. They may return to their previous location. They may vanish. They change because the very act of observing them changes them into something they were not before they were observed.

"Particles are not matter. Particles cannot make other particles. Particles have come from nothing and return to nothing. Or they are manifest from intelligence and return to it."

She eyed me with some concern. "You're crazy," she said as she stepped away.

"Really? Crazy? If I'm crazy why do you want me to come with you?"

"I'm not sure I do now."

"If you think I'm crazy, give some thought to this. Max Planck. You know Max Planck? German mathmetician who received a Nobel Prize for Physics for his work on the atom. Want to know what he said? Now, this is a guy who required facts and the scientific method to perform his experiments. No coo-coo stuff, no metaphysics, no magic. Here's what he said: 'As a man who has devoted his whole life to the most clear-headed science, to the study of matter, I can tell you, as a result of my research about atoms, this much: there is no matter as such. All matter originates and exists only by virtue of a force which brings the particles of an atom into vibration and holds this most minute solar system of the atom together. We must assume behind this force the existence of a conscious and intelligent

mind. This mind is the matrix of all matter.'"

She stared at me for long moments, apparently wondering if she should run or if she should haul out her pistol and shoot me as a menace to society. After some painful deliberation, she decided to leave, but not without words of warning.

"Be alert, Richard, and be prepared to run. Future Industries has commissioned people to take your little shifter from you and they will not be sensitive to your pleas when they do it."

I didn't have to ask how she knew. I had viewed my future briefly and saw what was going to happen. But I had plans to escape at the last minute and try to stay ahead of them until I could make a decision about a permanent leap from this timeline. I just wasn't ready for it now.

"You can't outrun them, Richard," she said. "They are watching you every minute. Understand?"

"Tell me something."

"Yes?"

"Are you all going to jump at the same time?"

"It's the only way we can arrive at the same time and place together."

"And if you all jump into a lake; what then?"

"I imagine we will drown, one and all." She sighed and looked away for a moment. "I don't expect to live forever, Richard. And you shouldn't expect to live more than a day or two if Future Industries has their say about it. I need to find my brother. Alive or dead. Understand? Why don't you come with us?"

"Aren't you afraid I'll make everyone else crazy with my craziness?"

"I need your craziness to keep me from doing something stupid over there."

I wondered if this was Future Industries' way of getting rid of me. After all, they no longer needed a gun or a hand grenade to kill someone they suspected might muck up the works. They could just have Monica Dodd convince me that I should jump sixty-five million years into the past, then erase the program that would guide me back. I'd be trapped in prehistoric Montana with Monica's brother and I wouldn't even know or understand that I didn't actually belong there. All memory of this world would be gone. The Wheel of Heaven would grind me to dust and there would be no trace of me anywhere in the present. I would not have been born. I would never exist at all. I was not even surprised to learn that I was not terribly concerned about it.

I shook the morbid idea from my mind and went to stand beside Monica, touched her gently on the shoulder, roused her from some private reverie. Her eyes, when she turned toward me, were dark and sad.

"Why do you think it so important to leave just now?" I asked. "I need more time to think about it. We haven't given this half the time for consideration that we should and I think you are headed for disappointment to say the least; disaster to say

the worst. This is not a minor move for me, you know. I'm tired and I'm not so young anymore. If I could... ."

She put a finger to my lips. "Future Industries has pretty well figured out how to power up Raymond's prototype machine, Richard, and they are going to conduct a complete run on the fourteenth. They don't know it because they can't see into the future, but I know that when they power up that machine, the entire electrical grid from Canada and Midwest America all the way to the East coast is going to shut down. It will be down for days. Millions of people will be without power. When they realize they can't use the machine, they'll use the confusion of the disaster to come after you. And you should, if you are not coming with me—us—you should use the confusion of the event to escape."

"So my choice is whether I die here among people who will see to it that I am properly planted, or in Montana where no one will see to it because we are all going to be fertilizer, reptile guano. Big choice. Oh, I suppose so. When do we leave?"

She smiled broadly. "The navigator says tomorrow at ten in the morning should give us the best chance to hit our target. I'll come by at eight to get you. Can you be ready?"

I could be and I would be. I used the rest of the day to pack and hide emergency supplies that I could retrieve on a return jump any time I needed them. I got my Remington shotgun and fifty rounds of rifled slugs, my .45 caliber service pistol with one hundred rounds, the K-Bar knife, a hatchet, three changes of skivvies and socks and some water purification tablets. If I needed food or more clothing, I could always jump back and get them from the survival kit. All I had to do now was live long enough to catch the next bus to the tar pit.

The fabric of life is seamless, said someone ages past. I wondered briefly if the weaver had fallen asleep at the loom. Or if the loom was set on automatic pilot and was now spinning designs insanely through eons of darkness and light, madly weaving and spinning down the ages, carelessly neglected by the pilot, the navigator and the chief engineer.

If tomorrow we jumped back into sixty-five million years of Earth history and found, not Sean Dodd, but a great, scaly, monster forbearer of a birdlike creature waiting to pick our bones, would we have enough time to shift gears, reverse traction, and come home to simpler things, like guns and bombs, brass knuckles and governments run amok?

Some canny paleo-anthropologist once estimated that a Tyrannosaurus might be able to get up to thirty-five miles an hour for a short distance. No human I know can run that fast, even in a frenzied dash for safety. I can't, and I know the people who would be jumping tomorrow couldn't, either.

Raptors, we've been told, can cruise that speed for a considerable time and they can leap about six times their height of two meters.

So what were our chances of getting where we thought we were going to go? One in a million, probably.

And what were our chances of surviving more than ten seconds if we did get where we thought we were going? One in a million, probably.

And what were the chances that, even if we found Sean Dodd, dead or alive, we could come back in one piece if we could come back to San Diego at all? One in a million, probably.

So, there you have it. The future seemed grim no matter where we went and no matter what or who we encountered along the way.

The unexamined life is not worth living, said some unidentified enlightened mage. But if we examine our lives too closely perhaps we'll find that it is not worth living anyhow. Okay, we have dreamers who write music that is wonderful to hear, musicians like Alexander Scriaben whose music makes us hope to live forever, that fills our head and causes us to dream, too. Beautiful dreams.

Then there are those whose dreams are nightmares; who write formulas for poison gas and atomic weapons, things that kill and maim and blind. Have any of these maddened people examined their own lives and, if so, what did they find?

Sadly, I thought, the dreamers were so busy dreaming their music that they left the ship of state unattended just long enough to allow it to be highjacked by those whose nightmares are destroying the planet.

Do good works in this life and you'll be rewarded in the next are words that were pounded into my head from the time I was old enough to understand what they meant. I stopped going to church because, as I aged, the words rang false. And, of course, I stopped paying attention to the speed and direction of the ship in which I was sailing.

Sure enough, it was highjacked by wealthy, greedy lawyers and politicians whose unexamined lives are filling the hold with garbage faster than any of us or all of us together can bail it out.

Not paying attention to the lives of others is why Brandy is living in another state unencumbered by my careless ambivalence. Not paying attention is why I don't get holiday cards from anyone anymore. I don't return the attention. They probably think I don't care, or they think I am dead. Sadly, they are right on both accounts.

Some months ago, I spent considerable time saying goodbye all my relatives, admonishing them not to look for me and not to answer too many questions when asked by anyone who was looking for me. I disappeared, hoping to make a new beginning with Brandy. It didn't work. So what difference would it make if I jumped sixty-five million years into the past and didn't return? There was precious little here to cherish and I doubted if anyone would even know I was gone.

Now there is something to ponder, however briefly or thoroughly one might endeavor to examine his or her life.

I completed my packing in short order and I probably forgot a lot of things I should not have forgotten. An ample dose of common sense might have been crammed into the duffle somewhere so that I might wrest it out and apply it liberally sixty-five million years ago. At the moment a well-oiled shotgun, a knife and a brightly honed hatchet seemed sufficient to save my life in a time before Earth captured some errant planetoid that we would come to call the moon. A packet of chlorine tablets seemed enough to purify the fetid swamps and incessant toxic volcanic acid rain into which we might fall on the early morrow.

And common sense probably would not apply in any event where it came to matching survival skills with a creature that looked upon any other living thing as food. We cosmopolitans, we flatlanders, simply aren't prepared for that kind of encounter.

But most spooky was the thought that around sixty-five million years ago there may have come from the heavens a block of iron so big that it killed nearly every living thing on Earth when it struck the north coast of the Yucatan Peninsula at something like 15,000 miles an hour. Dug a hole a mile deep and set the oceans to boiling. Clouds of ash and smoke covered the planet for centuries. A great wave washed over the planet carrying away and killing nearly everything. The ice melted, the continents trembled, the sky fell down to the ground.

And that's when we were going.

I had an idea that's why Monica's brother hadn't returned, but I could have been wrong about that. Maybe she was right; maybe the codes were so fouled up that they couldn't retrieve him properly. Or maybe they had brought him back and he was dead so they didn't bother to tell the family.

Government's been known to do stuff like that. Who's to argue? You try to sue for truth and they slap a billion dollars down on the table and ask if you have the time and money to match it in court. Nobody does. Right or wrong, they win.

Despite all the odds against them, Monica Dodd and her team of cowboys are going to try to find the rusted needle in the prehistoric haystack. And I, fool that I am, I am going with them because, anyway I look at it, I am dead. I know too much about this Shifter and I know the rubout boys aren't going to listen if I promise not to tell. They'll break out the erasers and start scrubbing.

Go or don't go. To be or not to be. There it is.

Packs were secured, weapons stached, bath taken, teeth brushed, meal was simmering in the kitchen. My favorite stuff. Fried diced potatoes, liberally sprinkled with salt and black pepper; diced Spam stirred in and, when they had cooked sufficiently, I would stir in three eggs, mix them all together until they were well done, ladle them into a platter and savor it with toasted English muffins smeared with real creamery butter and Mulberry jelly. It sounds like garbage, but if you haven't tasted it, you don't know what you're missing. The kids loved it and called it cowboy breakfast when they were still living at home. I wondered if

they ever made it for themselves and their families.

It was likely I wouldn't live long enough to find out.

ELEVEN

Rested and with the maudlin thoughts purged from my mind, the following morning found me lounging insouciantly in the front porch swing watching the Finches raiding the feeders. It was a beautiful day. Just warm enough, just bright enough, just balmy enough to be perfect. When I die, I thought, I want to cash in my chips on a day just like this one.

Then it occurred to me that it was precisely on this lovely day, a couple of hours hence, that I would join a team of adventurers on a journey somewhere so far back in history that nothing alive there had ever seen a human creature, and that, in all liklihood, we would all die before we could retrace our steps. So it was on this day, this beautiful summer day, that I had consciously elected to cash in my chips.

Monica arrived not a minute too late to prevent me from backing out of the deal. She signaled with a tap of the horn and I moaned off the swing with the parachute bag to join her for the ride to the jumping off point.

"Scared?" she asked after we had gone a couple of blocks.

"No."

"Excited?"

"No."

She looked at me intently for a moment. "Is something wrong? You seem, ah, depressed."

"Not."

"What, then?"

"This is about as interesting as waiting for the school bus. I don't want to go to school, but if I stay home, I get into big trouble. I'm not afraid and I'm not excited. If anything, I'm disinterested. Let's get it over with so I can do more important things."

She pursed her lips and turned her attention to driving to the rendezvous.

The jumping place turned out to be a swanky townhouse in La Jolla, chosen, Monica said, because it was about the last place anyone would expect nine people to translocate sixty-five million years back in time.

Where, I wondered, would be considered a likely place to find someone jumping into the past? The truth is that we could have jumped from my front porch and, if we returned a moment later, no one would have suspected we had been gone for sixty-five million years. I grew wary, thinking that I might have been lured into a trap where someone would kill me and take the Shifter.

Inside, the well furnished home was a beehive of activity.

"You could have gone back to the day your brother jumped and told him

not to go," said I, leaning close to her ear.

"Tried that for a week. He was nowhere to be found. What made you think of that?"

I told her about Raymond finding his father. She nodded sagely with pursed lips, eyes closed. "Raymond," she said. "And Judson Templeton. When have they gone, I wonder."

"'Way over the moon," said I.

"Ummmmm."

"Doesn't not finding your brother give you cause for alarm?" I asked presently.

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe he didn't jump that day. Maybe he was already gone. Maybe he was on a mountain in Hawaii. Maybe he was already dead. That kind of stuff."

"Do you have your Shifter with you?" Monica asked, ignoring my grim meanderings.

"I do," I replied.

"Well, don't activate it because it may conflict with the program our navigator has set to translocate us."

The navigator, I noticed, was examining a Shifter, verifying codes and telling his teammates what was about to occur. I leaned toward Monica again. She smelled faintly of lilacs.

"Is that Shifter yours or... ."

"His own. Everyone has a Shifter in case something goes wrong."

"Wrong? What could go wrong?" I asked, as if I didn't know. "Where did they get them?" I asked, as if I didn't know.

She requisitioned several extras while she was at it up there in twenty twenty-three. Thirty, to be exact, which was about all she could load into her handbag or she might have taken more.

"Thirty?"

Yes, thirty, she whispered with uncanny nonchalance. And repeated that she would have taken more if she had thought to take a suitcase with her. I suspect she or some of her colleagues will swipe a few more before long. Then we'll see people popping back and forth everywhere we look.

The Alpha Male and all of the team he commanded were former Navy SEALS, all in their mid to late forties and all rock-solid, less than one percent body fat bad to the bone knock 'em down and drag 'em out You Ess Navy SEALS. I looked like exactly what I was standing there with them: an old man gone soft around the middle, with grey hair and too many brown spots around the temples.

They could not have cared less about me. Or Monica, for that matter. They were commissioned to find a missing brother and that's all they had on their military minds at that moment. Come hell or high water, they were all going to leap

elsewhen, damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead.

The Magnificent Seven. Damn! You have to love the SEALS.

While everyone was listening to the team leader, I quietly launched the Regenesis program on my Shifter and let it run. If things "went wrong," I was coming home. I figured the SEALS could take care of themselves. For awhile, at least. Until they ran out of bullets and handgrenades, at least. Until the Raptors caught up with them, at least. Then they would be a la carte, al fresco.

The Alpha spread his arms into a wide arc, herding everyone into a semi circle, and began telling us what we might expect when we got to the other when. I already knew and so did Monica Dodd. His pep talk lasted about three minutes and he ended it with, "Alright, heat 'em up. Here we go."

If anyone had been listening to all that, the last thing they would have heard, right after all the weapons clattering, would have been *Pooooooong*.

* * * * *

It was pouring down rain. Buckets and barrels. Cats and dogs. We were knee deep in a hot, stinking marsh, surrounded by giant ferns and conifer-like trees two hundred feet high and the steaming water was thundering down like a waterfall from the canopy. A hot, steaming, thundering sauna.

The weapons were going to rust in a day or two, and the Shifters, if not protected wisely, would be useless in a matter of minutes if this continued.

"Forested plateau, eh?" I yelled at Monica.

"What?" she screamed back.

"Never mind, shouldn't we... ."

"This way," Team Leader bellowed, indicating that we should follow him to some place he had arbitrarily selected where we might find shelter.

We followed, slogging through the bacteria and virus infested marsh until we eventually found more solid ground. The SEALS unwrapped some gear and had shelters erected in a matter of minutes, a feat I thought remarkable given the circumstances and the fact that no one could hear anyone else above the roar of the falling rain. The SEALS lashed their shelters together to make one large tent, leaving a small tent for Monica. Men in one, Monica in the other. They did all that without communicating. I realized the trip had been planned for some time and the former SEALS had rehearsed their assault many times before.

Before what? I couldn't remember what came before and began to think that I had always been in the rain, in this place, under the tent with seven other men. Oddly, I didn't know who they were and it was clear that they were as puzzled about our predicament as I.

We all sat in the mud with our legs splayed out before us for some time, mindless of the blowing rain, heedless of any danger out there in the jungle. We stared first at the ground, then at our hands and soaking clothes, then at each other.

Monica sat in the mud ten feet away and stared at the torrents of rain. One edge of her shelter had collapsed from the weight of the water and it poured down her back, filling her jacket and trousers. She seemed unable to comprehend what was happening to her or how she might undo what she had done only minutes earlier.

The SEALS settled in to a kind of listless waiting. Alpha male had not posted a watch. Weapons were cast aside carelessly. They believed they were supposed to be here. They believed they had always been here, that this was their world. They had no memory of the twenty-first century or San Diego, California.

"I'm going over to see if I can repair her shelter," I said to no one in particular. None of them acknowledged.

I fumbled with the shelter awkwardly, blinded by the beating rain, and attached it securely to a branch of the tree against which it had been placed. It required several more minutes to convince Monica to move to a drier place in the center of the shelter. And it required even more precious minutes to explain the Regenesis program and that we should run it without delay before the SEALS went native and completely forgot who they were and why they came here in the first place.

Because she was having difficulty making sense of what I was saying, I played back the program on my Shifter. I had to run it four times before she began to understand.

"Imagine," said I, "showing this to the SEALS who have no experience with time jumping. You don't believe me and you've already jumped. If we don't get shot as a couple of delusional paranoids, we'll be fortunate."

The SEALS watched the rerun over and over like it was a television commercial. They were not convinced. These were guys who thought in terms of bombs, bullets and black oil. That they had recently jumped from the twenty-first century to BC sixty-five million just didn't compute.

Monica and I hovered in one corner of the tent. "I think this validates the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle," I said quietly.

"What?"

"The Heisen... . Never mind. I'll explain it to you in sixty-five million years."

"What's Heisenberg?" one of the SEALS asked.

I explained it. He squinched up his eyes and gazed at me with that look you would see on a deer staring into the headlights of an oncoming car. "It's like Murphy's Law with a college degree," I smiled. "Whatever can go wrong will."

He didn't think it was funny, turned away without fully understanding the principle, began cleaning his weapons.

"Why is it so damned hot?" Monica grumbled. "I feel like I'm suffocating. I can't breathe the air is so heavy."

"Get used to it," I said. "Earth is probably tens of thousands of miles closer

to the sun than it will be in sixty-five million years. If it ever stops raining, you'll notice that there is no moon in the sky."

"Why?"

"Because it hasn't wandered into the solar system yet to be captured by the Earth. I think I read somewhere that it happens after humans are the dominant lifeforms."

"But, I thought the moon came from the Earth when... ."

A great flash of lightning burst overhead, followed by a clap of thunder so loud that we felt it shiver our flesh and bones. Monica lunged forward and wrapped her arms around me, clinging desperately, nearly strangling me.

I peeled her off and gently pushed her away.

"Sorry," she said. "I'm afraid of lightning. Do you think it will rain much longer?"

"I do," said I, poking my head out of the shelter to look at the sky. "I have a suggestion, if you're willing to listen."

"If you're going to say we should go back to San Diego and try in a couple of days, the answer is no." She turned her back to me and folded her arms across her chest.

"Actually I was going to suggest that we give it up altogether. I'm certain that it is impossible to follow someone through time. We might always end up at a different place and time than the person we're trying to follow. Everything moves. Everything changes from one second to the next. That's why we jumped at the same time, and you know it. If we had jumped two seconds later than the SEALS had jumped, we would be here by ourselves."

"But these are the proper coordinates," she protested.

"Doesn't matter. Sean isn't here and we might not find him if we stay and search for the rest of our lives."

She turned toward me, her eyes dark and moody. "Let's wait until it stops raining and search for one day. If we find nothing, we can go back."

I reluctantly nodded my consent, knowing that it would be fruitless to suggest otherwise. If the rain ever quit, mosquitoes the size of small birds would descend upon us like the wrath of God or giant bird-like creatures would pick our bones clean before we could punch in the codes to return to San Diego and the twenty-first century.

We hunkered down to a kind of restless waiting while the hot rain and wind lashed the shelters mercilessly. It finally eased up in the middle of the long, miserable night. By dawn the rain had slackened and the wind died down to a tolerable ten miles an hour; just enough to keep the weaker flying insects away. But the sky did not clear. Clouds, low and heavy with moisture, barely cleared the tops of the tallest trees.

The SEALS were out early, breaking camp and scanning the forest for hos-

tile beasts. Alpha male was studying a compass, trying to determine which way was North. I wandered over to stand beside him.

"Commander," I said, "that probably isn't going to work very well here,"

"Well, it doesn't, but why, I wonder?" he asked.

"Looks like the sun is rising in the West, eh?"

"That's what I was thinking. Or I'm 'way turned around."

"Either that," I speculated, "or the magnetic poles have reversed. I imagine it happens every few hundered thousand years as a matter of routine. Or the Earth has flipped over and is rotating backwards. The ancient Egyptians recorded an event like that once."

He stared at me in disbelief. "That the planet flipped over?"

"Well, only that the sun began rising in the West and that all the people were lost and could not find their way to familiar places. And the sky fell down."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"It means they believed the sun began to rise in the West and that it grew dark and people could not find their way home. So either the poles reversed or the planet flipped over north to south and began rotating in an apparent opposite direction."

"Everyone would have been killed," he offered.

"Nearly everyone. There would most certainly have been an immense flood as the oceans swept over the continents."

"Flood?"

"Flood. You know, similar to that one recorded in the Bible. And perhaps many times prior to that. The continents would have moved. The water would have remained where it was. So the land would have slipped under the water until the turning stopped. Then the oceans would slosh back and forth, scouring the land and drowning most living things."

"And when do you think this happened?"

I rubbed the stubble on my chin. "No idea," I said. "Maybe dozens of times in the past. Or in the future, I guess, since we are in the past. But dozens of times, at least."

Alpha male folded the compass and slipped it into his pocket, sighed heavily, and stomped off in Monica's direction.

Monica was trying to fix her hair. It hung in ruined strings, plastered to the sides of her face by the heat and humidity. She raked it furiously with her fingers but it was a losing battle. The Alpha male offered her a hurrah rag and she soon had her hair bound up and out of her eyes.

"If we're going to find your brother," he said, "we had better get a move on. It may rain again. Or we may encounter some... uh...dinosaurs or something."

Monica nodded agreement, looked briefly at me, then began gathering up her gear. The Commander went back to join his comrades and they soon had all

their gear stowed, weapons cleaned and oiled and were lining up to hear the plan of the day.

Monica was disconsolent. She stared balefully at the darkened skies and pouted.

"I wish it would brighten up," she said. "It will be difficult to find Sean in the darkness."

"Impossible is more like it," said I. "Have you read anything at all about time shifting?"

"Like what, for instance?"

"Like Heisenburg, for one. Like Raymond Templeton for another, and all of his colleagues, for more. It is their expression that one probably cannot follow someone who has preceeded them through time. The second person might arrive at a different place, even if the coordinates are exactly the same."

"But a mile or so shouldn't matter if we concentrate our search within this area, should it?"

I led her away from the SEALS in case they were able to hear what I had to say.

"Monica," I said grimly, "I don't mean we may have landed a mile or so, or a few miles from Sean. I mean it is possible that we landed thousands of years before or behind him. We may be on a different planet, for crying out loud. I'm surprised you don't know that."

"Where did you hear that?" she asked incredulously.

I told her of Raymond's White Paper on Time Shifting; his and all his fellow theorists who postulated that two people shifting at different times to the same coordinates might arrive at different times and locations. Or one or both might not arrive at all.

"That Heisenburg thing," she said softly.

"Yes, that. And the very fact that everything has changed since sixty-five million years from now. Look, you were certain we would arrive on a forested plateau. We arrived in a swamp. You think we arrived in Montana. Who knows for certain about that? We may be in Texas or South America; where they were sixty-five million years ago. What if the planet turned over a few hundred thousand years ago and we are really in Africa or Australia or Chile? How do you think we could ever find your brother if we begin working from the assumption that we are in prehistoric Montana and North is North when it might really be South?"

"What does it matter if we are in Africa? Sean would have shifted here, too, would he not?"

I explained again the uncertainty of two people or groups of people arriving at the same location and time if they shifted separately. I even explained that if we were lucky enough to get back to San Diego to the house and time from which we departed and tried again, we might find ourselves in a completely different

world than the one in which we believed we were now in. It would be neither San Diego nor the early Cretaceous era. It might be Day One or it might be Honolulu, December seventh, ninteen forty-one.

"What then? And the worse problem is that we won't even know it unless we run the Regenesis program—if we have the common sense to remember to review it—that we aren't where we are supposed to be. The SEALS will sign up for war duty and I'll go to work in a factory making bombs or something. You'll be pushing parts wagons at an airplane factory in Seattle if you manage to make it back to the States. We wouldn't have the faintest idea that we are not supposed to be alive fighting the Japanese in ninteen forty-one. Get it? What then? What then?"

Monica began to cry. Not openly, not wailing and wringing her hands. She burbled and great tears ran down her cheeks and dropped onto her bodice. I put out my hand to comfort her but she slapped it away, attracting the attention of several of the SEALS. They watched for a moment, satisfied themselves that I wasn't misbehaving, then turned back to their chores. I walked away and leaned against a great conifer, fairly certain right then that we were all going to die before we could get back to San Diego and the twenty first century.

The sky darkened, brightened, darkened again, and the rain began to fall.

Unseen creatures scurried away to find shelter. We got under our ripstop nylon and grumbled. Last time I looked Monica was still crying.

But the rain and wind and heavy air did not dampen her resolve to find her brother. She wept silently until the rain ceased again two hours later. Then she was out of the shelter and stuffing things into a duffle, casting furtive glances about the forest, listening and stiffening every time the ground trembled or a sound of distant thunder rolled across the sodden land.

"What is that?" she asked, holding a branch to keep her balance as a temblor rolled like an ocean wave beneath our feet.

"Pretty clear to me it's an earthquake," Alpha Male opined from the patch where he squatted to examine a bird-like foot print about a foot wide. "This is old," he said. "Rain has nearly obliterated it, but I think I can safely estimate this critter is two meters tall. And it was here only a couple of days ago."

Everyone went over to have a look at the footprint. I guessed it might be larger than six feet tall; maybe eight or nine. Maybe more. There was a lot of nodding and humming, then we all began to look around, scanning the dark jungle for shapes that should not be there.

Monica slung her duffle over her shoulder and began walking down a slight grade along a game trail. I snapped out of my fantasy and rushed to overtake her.

"No, no, Monica," I cautioned. "This is a game trail. The varmit that left that footprint over there comes down this path every day or so looking for breakfast. If you walk down this trail, you're probably going to run right into it."

She stopped and thrust her chin toward me.

"You machos can stand around speculating about dinosaurs if you want. All day. But I'm going to find my brother. If he was here, I'm betting he walked down this path to see where it leads. And so am I."

With that she turned and strode resolutely into the jungle.

Clearly, she hadn't heard a word I'd said about the improbability of the nine of us being in the same place and time as her brother when he shifted twenty years earlier. I looked at the Alpha Male. He shrugged, released the safety on his machine gun, nodded to his company and we all fell into line behind her, slogging through the soggy duff, through the mud, through the wailing wind, deep into the trembling jungle for long hours until we came to a wide valley layered with a silver mist. Beyond the valley, barely discernible through the fog and steam, we could see an enormous volcano belching magma and sulphurous smoke. The wind drove it away from us but we could taste it, smell it, feel it on our skin. Acid rain that created the world we know was drifting across the valley as thick as a London fog.

"Notice there are no human footprints on this trail?" I asked when we had settled down for a Spartan meal.

"I did," replied the Commander. "But no bird tracks either. Maybe we're going in the wrong direction."

"Umm," said I. "I doubt there is a right direction here. Seems kind of hopeless... ."

A great gust of wind swept up out of the valley, throwing sodden debris high into the air, forcing us to scramble for safety among the trees. It moaned; a sort of whoom, whoom, swooshing sound. The trees bent before it and good sized branches were torn from them, arching upward and away, out of sight.

"What the hell is that?" one of the SEALS screamed.

It was a whirlwind spawned by the thermals being created on the slopes of the volcano fifteen miles across the valley. The ground trembled again, a long spasm, rolling and surging beneath our feet. The trees were twisting and groaning like the masts of tall ships swaying in a wide, high wake.

It crossed my mind that we might not have a lot of time remaining to live if we failed to make some valid plans for survival. Had it been left to me, I would have opted to go back to San Diego and I reached into my pocket to find the Shifter when the Commander spoke.

"You," he said, jamming a finger at one of the SEALS, "start looking for signs. Footprints, trampled vegetation, anything that could give us a clue to where our subject is."

The SEAL unslung his piece, released the safety and headed back along the trail, head down, practiced eyes seeing everything at once.

The Commander made a circle with his arms and gathered us in like a mother hen. He addressed Monica directly. "If we do not find any signs of your brother

by evening, I believe we will have to return to San Diego and perhaps try again somewhat better prepared."

I was going to say that there was nothing he could do or bring or imagine that would prepare his team to adequately confront the creatures we might encounter, but I thought it might not be wise to question his authority at that particular moment. His weapon was a lot bigger than mine.

We had not long to wait for the scout to return with encouraging news.

"Found something back there," he said. "Looks like someone, or something, not too large, made a trail into the jungle off to the left. Tracks are not fresh but might have been a human."

A minute later we were again following an elated Monica Dodd as she heedlessly marched into the darkening shade. The Commander caught up with her and pulled her to a stop. He put his arm around her shoulder and bent his head close to hers, nodding and gesturing, scowling and whispering. When he was finished, she stepped aside and let him take the lead. Then she got into the line with me, with three SEALS in front of us and three behind. The three behind us were nearly walking backwards as they scanned the jungle behind us.

"I suppose they take seriously the possibility that we might become raptor food," I said, bending close to Monica's ear.

"What?"

"Ah, nothing. What did the Commander say?" As if I didn't know.

"None of your business."

Put her in her place is what he did. Told her who was boss is what he did. Said if she didn't get into line behind his gunmen, he was going home is what he did. And that was just about the smartest thing that had happened since we got here twelve hours ago the way I saw it. As unlikely as it seemed, we might just find Sean Dodd alive and take him home without anyone getting hurt.

Man, I couldn't wait.

The canopy closed above us, thick and stifling, still dripping huge drops of sticky liquid upon us as we passed. Pungent odors of rotting vegetation, damp, musky soil and animal spoor was almost overwhelming. A breeze was in the high canopy but it hardly reached us a hundred feet below where the trail was barely visible through the entangled growth. The sky, when we could see it, was clearing and we observed that the the sun, immense and brilliant white, appeared low on the horizon, which was not where it should have been if we had been in Montana in the twenty-first century. The earth appeared to be rotating at nearly ninety degrees in relation to the poles. The planet had not inclined, or had only slightly, and the sun was huge and intense. At midday, still carefully following the faint trail before us, the temperature soared to over one hundred degrees.

We stopped frequently for water and to get our bearings. Our third stop, beside a murky, warm, fast flowing stream, was to give everyone a chance to bathe

briefly and take care of personal business. The Commander warned everyone to be aware that predators might be in the water, then strolled along the embankment, eyes on the ground. Presently he stopped, bent, and retrieved something from the sharp grass. He brought it over for me to see.

"Damn, it's hot," he said, handing me a piece of paper stained black with blood.

"Earth is tens of thousands of miles closer to the sun," I explained. "You think he got hurt?"

"Probably. Not badly, however. Maybe snagged on one of the branches. Where's Miss Dodd?"

I cocked my head toward the jungle. He nodded and went back to the water's edge to look for more signs. When Monica reappeared, I showed her the paper. She paled, her eyes wide with fear, but calmed when I suggested that it was a quite minor wound, perhaps an insect bite or a scrape against a sharp branch.

"But it means he's alive. He's here!"

It meant he had been here but it didn't mean he was alive, I thought; said instead, "Right. We'd probably better move on. If we stay in one place too long, we might become a target for predators."

A foul stench of rotted flesh forewarned us of the skeletal remains of a large animal laying along side the trail. It wasn't just a skeleton; it was remains. Scattered remains. Torn apart and scattered over an area a hundred feet wide. Whatever it was, it had died violently. And slowly.

The same way we were going to die if its killer finds us out here rubbernecking in the Cretaceous nightmare.

Sometimes you know deep inside that bad things are going to happen. I'd been directing my attention toward the darkness under the trees for some time, with that creepy feeling across the back of my neck that something was watching, following, waiting, licking its chops. When the attack came, we were all completely unprepared.

A large bird, perhaps eight feet tall, looking much like an ostrich with a thick neck and the head of Komodo Dragon, leaped from the jungle onto one of the SEALS, closed its jaws over his head and literally snatched him from the ground, then bounded away before anyone could react.

"Oh, god, oh god," Monica wailed, falling to the ground and covering her head. I dropped beside her, waiting for another beast to grab one or more of us and go galloping off into the steaming jungle to tear us to shreds and eat us at its leisure.

The SEALS went into combat mode, standing back to back in a narrow circle, sawing down anything and everything that was not human with their automatic weapons.

The racket seemed to go on for hours. The air was filled with the odor of

cordite and hot steel, and not a small amount of significantly vulgar cursing and screaming. When it was done, I was surprised to note that very little spent brass was littering the ground around the SEALS. I thought they had fired for an eternity. It had been only a few seconds.

The quiet was deafening. I rose to my feet, helped Monica to stand, supported her as she held on to me, trembling and whimpering with fear.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Hell no, I'm not okay!" she screamed. "I'm not going to be okay until we... ."

"Quiet you two," the Commander bellowed, holding a hand toward us.

His eyes were fixed on a shape a few yards ahead of us; something low against a tree. He signaled wordlessly to one of the team members to check it out. When he returned, he bent close to the Commander who ushered the other SEALS into a brief pow wow. Two of them went back to the shadows and soon returned with a badly mauled comrade; close to death as far as I could see. His neck and shoulders were punctured with large wounds and the skin hung from his face in hideous shreds.

I wasted no time in activating his Shifter's Regenesis program and setting the codes for the previous morning. When he became conscious of his surroundings, he would be in the LaJolla Town House with nothing to remind him of what happened. Before the Alpha Male could protest or suggest an alternative, I sat him up, put the Shifter in his hand and hit the button.

Pooong.

His Shifter fell into the puddle where he had been sitting. No one thought to ask why the Shifter had not returned with him, too lost in awe at the sudden, silent attack were they. I recovered it with as little attention as possible and slipped it into my pocket.

"Good God," Monica said, fingers at her lips. "I wouldn't have dreamed of doing that."

"Well, you had all better begin thinking of it because unless they killed that whatever, I imagine it will be back for another taste."

"I think we missed it," said the Commander.

I looked at Monica. She sat in the soggy duff staring dumbstruck at the spot the wounded man had recently occupied.

"What about it," I asked. "Are you ready to go home now?"

"Yes," she replied, then, "No, I'm not."

And she repeated it twice.

"Miss Dodd," the Commander growled, "right now you have no say in the matter. We're leaving before someone is killed." He turned toward me. "You say my man will wake up and will not have suffered any wounds?"

"As far as time is concerned, he didn't make the jump with us. He probably

will just believe he somehow didn't shift. Or he may not even remember what he's doing there and go home, if he can figure out where home is."

"I'm not doing this crap anymore," someone grumbled.

"Yeah, we're not getting paid enough for this shit," another added.

The SEALS got into another huddle and when they broke their decision was unanimous. They were going home whether the two of us agreed or not. The Commander was making calculations with his Shifter and I was opening my mouth to protest when a wailing screech resounded from the direction of the stream where we had recently bathed and rested. The sound made my chest and skull vibrate.

"What in the unholy hell was that?" Monica asked.

"That is the sound of God laughing as It flies through the world," answered someone behind me. *"Bah-bahm-wawa-ge-zhe-go-qua*. The Jabberwocky. The Abominal Sasquatch. The rough beast whose hour has come 'round at last."

We turned to see the owner of the voice. All six of the SEALS instantly trained their weapons on the point where they thought the sound had originated.

Sean Dodd, looking for all the world like he fully expected us to be in his prehistoric world, stepped from the shadows. Monica screamed, leaped to her feet and rushed to embrace her brother. She kissed him, squeezed him, kissed him more until, embarrassed and confused, he pushed her away.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Your sister," she exclaimed. "Monica. Your little sister!"

It was more than he could comprehend. When she explained who we were, why we were there, how we had come and what we planned to do, his knees buckled and he sank awkwardly to the ground.

"It can't be," he said, shaking his head in wonder. "I left only day before yesterday and now you tell me you are here from the year two thousand and three. It's impossible for so many years to have passed."

Monica insisted that I run the Regenesis Program several times until her brother could integrate it all into his psyche. At last he turned away from the screen and stared at her.

"You were a child when I left. How have you become older than I? How can I know you as an adult? How will it affect our lives if we return to the time we left?"

"Not *if* we return, *when* we return. Which is straightaway. Commander, set the codes and let's go home!" She was smiling broadly.

"Hold it," I warned, holding up a hand like a traffic cop. "Can't do that. Won't work."

"What do you mean?" three people asked at the same time.

I turned to Sean. "You said you shifted two days ago. Not yesterday? We were told you shifted yesterday."

"I was supposed to shift yesterday but I guess the controllers learned that some agent from the federal government was snooping around trying to find me.

Some woman. So they kept me hidden for a few days, then decided to translocate me a day early because they felt the woman was getting too close. I wonder if they found out who she was?"

I pointed to Monica and she held up a hand.

Sean fell over backwards onto the ground and stared at the sky. "I don't... I can't... ."

Monica explained it all to him again, slowly and carefully, running through the sequence of events as she remembered them. We had come back for him, she explained, because he had been gone for twenty years. The machine that projected him into the Cretaceous era didn't even exist any more. The project had been abandoned and he was counted as lost in action.

"It was you who came looking for me," Sean muttered.

"To warn you not to shift because they couldn't bring you back."

"My God."

"Yes."

I touched his shoulder and he sat up, reeling groggily.

"You seem to remember the events surrounding your translocation," I said. "Can you tell me how you've done that? Because we cannot remember anything of our shifting unless we use the Regenesis Program."

"Ah, yes." Sean said after some moments. He slipped a small booklet from his breast pocket. "Before you had that thing, I had this. My logbook. My diary. We knew from previous events that people could not always remember having translocated, so I kept a running account of everything that happened." He turned the notebook toward Monica. "See here? I even entered the part where you were looking for me."

She looked, patted him tenderly on the cheek and told the Commander to punch the codes that would return them to real time.

"Wait!" I said, again holding up my hand. "You can't do that. It will not work."

"Why not?" Monica asked.

"Yeah, why not?" the Commander asked.

"Because," I replied, "what we have here is a paradox. Sean translocated twenty years ago plus two days. We translocated yesterday. If we return together, Sean will either appear with us as a young man in two thousand and three, having jumped twenty years ahead in time. Or he will appear with us as a forty year old man and will have lost twenty years of his life. Or we will translocate back to the year ninteen eighty-four at our present ages and will lose twenty years of our lives or we will appear as we were in ninteen eight-four and will have to live those twenty years over again."

I looked at all of them. They stared back with their jaws slack and their eyes glazed. It was going to be hard sell.

"We have to translocate separately. Sean by himself back to his world and

us together back to ours," I continued when no one spoke to challenge my theories.

It was very quiet for a time. We all stood in the drifting fog and gusting wind to ponder all the ramifications of what I had just proposed.

Monica broke the silence. "If I translocate with Sean will I return to his time as a twelve year old girl?"

"Probably."

"But you're not certain."

"No."

"If I do and I have this with me," she held up the Shifter, "will it record all these events and remind me of all that I have to do in my future?"

"Well, yes, except that you will not have to do this because we will have undone it. In which case, the Shifter may not return with you, since you will not have gone forward in time to steal it."

"The mad fishmonger shovels his periwinkles to and fro," Sean said, staring vacantly at his sister.

The Commander jumped to his feet and stomped around for awhile. "This is driving me crazy," he bellowed. "I say we punch in the codes and get the hell out of here. I think I speak for my troops as well."

They all nodded and grumbled, shuffling and kicking leaves and debris with their boots.

"Go right ahead," Monica said. "You know where to find the rest of your payment?"

"I do, m'am."

"Then thank you for helping me. I don't suppose I'll ever see you in the future."

The SEALS stood together in a tight group and the Commander made all the proper keystrokes with his Shifter. *Pooooong*.

They vanished, presumably back to the townhouse in La Jolla on August 13th, two thousand and three.

Six Shifters dropped into the duff where they had been standing.

"They'll never remember a thing," I said.

"How did you do that?" Monica asked.

"My secret. Now. We have to make a decision about who goes where and when. I am going back to my house two days ago if I can make it and... ."

The gound began to roll, very gently at first, then more violently until a loud cracking resounded through the jungle. The volcano exploded and the sky closed above us. Fire and massive debris arched into the sky in a great billowing cloud of sulfur and brimstone. Across the valley a massive pyroclastic flow raced down the slopes of the thundering volcano.

"Better make it quick," I added, "because that is going to prompt some

nasty things to begin looking for a way out of the valley. And we are in their patch."

Monica quickly adjusted her Shifter, compared her numbers with mine, and looked at me with a sad, resigned smile on her lips. "I'm going back with Sean," she said. "And try it again."

"Before you do, tell me where you left the money to pay the Navy guys. I'll send it to them."

"I don't know how to contact them, so you can't send them the money."

"Then I'll send it back to you and you can use it for college or something."

"That won't be necessary. Someone has already done it."

"Ah, but you see," I said. "It was I."

Her eyebrows went up half an inch. She gave me the address and tapped the Shifter.

Pooong.

Her Shifter dropped onto the soggy ground. I managed to find room for all of them in my parachute bag. The sky grew darker as the a great roiling cloud of sulfur and ash rose into the sky above the jungle. Time to go.

Pooong.

August thirteenth, two thousand and three. My front porch. I lounged insouciently in the swing, watching the Finches raid the feeders. It was a beautiful day. Just warm enough, just bright enough, just balmy enough to be perfect. When I die, I thought, I want to cash in my chips on a day just like this one.

A black sedan approached the house slowly, paused for a moment when it was even with the walkway, then continued on until it was out of sight at the end of block.

Presently, it came back and the driver turned into the driveway.

TWELVE

Some astute philospher observed that life is not about destinations but about journeys, adventures, discovery. Life is not about cramming as much activity as one can into the time we are alloted, but utilizing the precious few years we have in such a way that, when we leave, we can feel we did everything right as far as it was within our power to do right, and that we did as little harm and as much good to others as was humanly possible for us to do. Most people like to pretend that is how they manage their lives; more than a few just don't care one way or the other.

Most of those who don't care seem to be working for the various governments of the world and, because their mindless obedience to senseless orders eventually comes to the attention of their department heads, sooner or later more than one of them have come into my neighborhood pointing pistols in my direction.

Only because I was curious enough to be watching was I able to observe the driver holding a revolver close to his right thigh as he exited the vehicle. Be-

fore he could raise it and fire, I rolled off the swing onto my parachute bag, ripped open the Velcro and withdrew my .45, pulled the slide, flipped off the safety and fired over the concrete block railing just as the driver got off two shots.

His rounds shattered the front windows into my livingroom. My shot hit him just below his left eye, driving him backward into the side of the car. His revolver went sailing over the top of the car into the grass as he crashed to the pavement stone cold dead.

It got very quiet for what seemed a long, long time as I lay on the porch with my face against the cool concrete wondering what the hell had just happened. People are shooting at me again, I thought. People are always shooting at me. I even had a moment when I thought I had remembered seeing it all in a dream I'd had a couple of days earlier before I came out to lounge in the swing.

Why was I in the swing? Waiting for something to happen. Why was my parachute bag under the swing? Why was my pistol in the bag? Why had I put so many shifters into the bag and where had I got them?

I picked one up and flipped it open, watched the Regenesis program play back the last few hours before I found myself on the swing watching the birds.

And, of course, I thought it was someone's idea of a joke.

Or that I had gone stark raving coo-coo.

Or both.

I awoke with a start, my heart pounding in my chest, my mouth dry and burning. I leaped to my feet, expecting the murdered agent to be laying tits up in the driveway beside his big black sedan.

Nothing.

The wind soothed the branches of the trees and birds quarreled over the seeds in the feeders. Another mindless nightmare of death and mayhem leaked away into the void as I gathered myself into the present. When I turned, I stumbled over the parachute bag, spilling some of the translocators onto the cold concrete porch. As I knelt to retrieve them, a black sedan slowed and turned into the driveway. When I stood again, I had the pistol hidden behind my right thigh.

An attractive lady with red hair and neon green eyes emerged, straightened her skirt and cast an alluring smile in my direction.

Monica Dodd.

Well," said I, "that was a quick trip."

"For you, perhaps, but it was four miserable years for me."

"What? Four years? I believe I've been here only a matter of minutes! Tell me about it. What did you do?"

"Nothing to tell, Richard. Or little. I spent most of my time trying to fit into a society that did not want me or need me. I didn't return as a little girl; I was me as I am now. Older than my brother by a long shot. Of course, our parents didn't know who I was and didn't want to find out. I spent a great deal of time running

from the police who believed I was a spy or something. I got tired of it. I tried to see some of my old school friends, but they were just children. I frightened them. And, to make matters worse, I had to avoid myself back there so I wouldn't create some sort of paradoxical time warp. It didn't seem to matter that there were two of me; time proceeded normally for both of us. The only problem was that one of us belonged there and the other did not. Could not. So, I came home."

"How did you manage...?"

"By the way," Monica interrupted, "I think we can say that the Heisenberg Principle doesn't work all the time, eh? We landed right about where my brother landed and I went with him back to my home town, then returned here on the first click."

I shrugged. "It is something they built into the translocators; a device they called a Heisenberg Variable Compensator. If it detects an anomoly, it finds and replaces any missing parts of the puzzle. Everyone who translocates at the same time to the same coordinates arrives together in one piece. But how did you manage to get back? I had your remote when you vanished with your brother."

She came up the steps, waited until I had cleared the chamber of the pistol and put it away, then walked into the house. I followed, waiting for her answer.

"I already told you that I pinched thirty of them when I went forward in time. You don't really think I was going to let you take all of them from me, do you? And there is something else at work here; I remember what happened without having to run the Regenesis Program. Did you notice?"

Yes, I had made a note of it, and so had I remembered Monica and what she had done, where she had gone. And I knew without question exactly what the translocators in the parachute bag were.

"Some sort of mental conditioning?" I asked.

"Does it matter?" Monica responded. "We remember; that's all that is important."

I nodded, narrowing my eyes at her suspiciously. "So, what now?"

"Do you mind if I freshen up a bit? And could you put on some coffee?"

"In there," said I, pushing my chin toward the master bedroom. "Would you like some breakfast?"

"Something light." She was gone down the hall and into the bedroom.

When she returned, she poured a cup of coffee, stirred in some whitener and sat with her elbows on the table. I finished fixing scrambled eggs with diced ham and toast, served it to her, sat with my own opposite her so I could see her face.

"Do you believe in God?" she asked presently.

"Sometimes."

"Sometimes?"

"Sometimes. Usually more often no than yes."

She nodded thoughtfully, worked on her eggs, drank some coffee. "I probably shouldn't even ask what that means," she said.

"That's good because I don't want to explain it."

We ate in silence. She pursed her lips and nodded to herself, as if confirming some secret thing she thought she knew about me. Nodding with her lips pursed and her green eyes hidden beneath a furrowed brow. Nodding and frowning.

Truth is, she knew practically nothing about me worth mentioning. And I knew even less about her. My knowledge of her was that she was pretty, red hair, green eyes, nice figure and great legs. She carried a 9mm semi-automatic pistol and worked for the government and that automatically made her a potential enemy. She had a brother named Sean. She and he were time travelers. That's what I knew about Monica Dodd. It was both enough and not nearly enough.

A minute passed before she spoke again. "I'll bet you eat standing over the kitchen sink, " she said confidently.

"Sometimes."

"And other times?"

"Is it important? I asked, trying unsuccessfully to keep my voice calm. "I mean, are you are shrink or what?"

"A psychologist, actually. I was a profiler before I was hired at DICE."

"Well, then," said I, "if you want my profile why not just pull it from the files at the agency?" And realized with a start that she already had.

She smiled disarmingly and cocked her head slightly to the right. "Just tell me," she said softly.

"Standing at the front door. Standing on the porch. Standing in front of the TV."

"But you're sitting now."

"Because you're here. If you weren't, I'd be in the porch swing watching the birds, not even thinking about eating until noon."

"You don't have three regular meals, then?"

"Rarely. I might eat once or twice; other times six or eight small meals."

"Things that are easy to fix. Microwave stuff."

I pushed my plate away and put my elbows on the table, glared at her balefully. "I think we should finish this conversation here and now and you should leave." I stood abruptly and went outside to sit in the porch swing. The swing was one of my sanctuaries. I slept in it all night occassionally, rocking gently in the evening breeze, waking to the sounds of the birds in the early hours of morning. It was pleasant but it killed my back so I tried not to sleep there if I could help it; that is to say, if I had enough sense to get up and go to bed.

Monica opened the door and stepped lithely onto the porch. She was carrying her shoes. It seemed unlikely that she was going to leave before annoying me

a bit more. I moved to the middle of the seat to let her know that I didn't want her to sit with me.

She sat anyhow, placing her shoes in her lap. "You're a polemic," she said. "An iconoclast."

"And you are becoming an annoying bore," said I, moving away and making a point of not looking at her.

"I imagine you sometimes eat your food out of the same pot you cook it in, with the same spoon you used to stir it. Drink juice right out of the bottle."

"Why waste water and soap washing dishes and tools if you don't have to?"

"Exactly. Very utilitarian."

"It's a man thing," I said. "Do you find that objectionable?"

"Not at all, Richard. Odd but not objectionable. Iconoclastic."

I opined that she hadn't known many men other than the fops with whom she worked, men who were whipped into line by dress codes and questionable political ethics, spit shined shoes and doubled breasted suits, polished badges and oiled pistols, dress right, lockstep, and yessir, sir; men whose every action pushed the world toward chaos, but who couldn't see it and wouldn't admit it if they did.

"And you find that objectionable, then?" she asked darkly.

I found it objectionable in the extreme only because she was part of a group of people who really didn't give two hoots in a handbasket about what anyone outside her elite circle cared for or lived for or strived for.

She stirred restlessly and watched the finches at the birdbath.

I thought of the translocator humming away in my right pocket.

I had looked into the future and knew what was going to happen in the next few seconds. I had programmed the translocator to prevent it.

She was seated to my left side. Her fingers moved slightly toward the shoes in her lap. A slight increase in air pressure from behind us hinted that someone was appearing from the ether; one of Monica's colleagues with a drawn pistol pointed in my direction. We vanished a fraction of a second before he pulled the trigger and killed us right there on my porch in San Diego in the year two thousand and three.

We appeared in the swampy jungle on the path where one of the SEALS had been snatched away by a Velociraptor sixty-four million years earlier. The beast was there, lurking behind the bushes, startled, perhaps, to see us appear suddenly from the twentieth century. In five seconds it would leap over the shrub and grab a victim by the head, carry him away into the jungle and dine at its leisure.

The seconds ticked away. Monica screamed, just as I had seen it on the Regenesis playback. At the fifth second we reappeared on the porch, sitting in the swing. Monica was still screaming. I grabbed her by the arm, leaped from the swing and bolted into the house.

The agent with the drawn pistol was at that moment appearing on the path sixty-four million years ago and was standing exactly where the SEAL had been standing when he was grabbed and mauled to death. With no one to protect him or reprogram his translocator, the young man would not be coming home again.

I wondered briefly how an archeologist might explain the rusty fossillized pistol if it was ever found somewhere in the future.

Monica slipped from my grasp and fell. Her shoes bounced across the floor and came to rest beneath the dining table. She looked up at me, gasping and clawing at the air between us. Had she been able to reach her own pistol, she might have killed me herself.

But I had seen that part of the future, too, and knew she would not.

She asked me what happened and I explained it. I could tell from the look on her face that she wished I hadn't, wondered aloud how anyone would ever be able to explain what had happened to the agent.

"Never will," said I. "Unsolved mystery. Abducted by little green men, never to be seen again on this planet."

"Do you know him?"

"No. Do you?"

She shook her head. "I didn't see him. I couldn't... ."

"Well, we won't know the next one, either."

"But how did you...? Why didn't he... ?"

"I read the instruction manual; he didn't." I said. "Besides, they sent a boy to do a man's job and he blew it. But it proves something you said earlier. Our tenure on this planet is just about completed."

I helped her to her feet. She straightened her skirt and pushed her hair away from her face.

"You, maybe," she responded, reclaiming some of her earlier composure. "Not me. They'll try to get you, but they aren't after me."

I sighed heavily and sat on the arm of the Lazyboy. "Why don't you, Monica, take a look at your future through the Regenesis program. There you will see that they really don't care right now if you get between their bullets and my heart. I imagine that they are hoping you do. You are spending entirely too much time on my porch rocking in my swing.

"But never mind. I've already looked and, to put it as succintly as I can, you are going to die before I, actually, and your friends at the agency will have done it.

"Now, I don't know about you, but I have important things to do with my life I didn't even know about so, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to begin."

I stood and began thinking of how I could program the translocator to get me away from the house, San Diego and the twentieth century for awhile.

Not nearly as easy to do as to imagine.

"I've a thought," Monica said pensively.

"And that is?"

"Well, I've been wondering about this ever since I pinched those translocators a few days ago. I suppose they have security teams trained to track stolen property, don't they? And I suppose they may have discovered that I took their machines and have come looking for me. Do you think the guy...the one you left in the jaws of that beast...do you think he might have been from the future?"

I hadn't thought of it but, of course, it made a lot of sense. Certainly, the manufacturer would have tight security to safeguard their precious invention or at least to apprehend anyone using it to travel in the wrong direction as Monica and I had done on more than one occassion.

"If he was," I said, "they will send another when they determine he has failed and won't return. They will view his Regenesis and see how we lured him to his death. They won't make the same mistake again."

Monica's eyes widened with alarm. "How will we get away from them? Do you suppose they are watching us now?" She searched the room with her eyes.

I was tempted to tell her about Raymond Templeton's prototype translocator, the one without the Regenesis chip; the one I could use to jump back and forth through time and space without being tracked.

I was tempted but I resisted.

I didn't trust her that much.

It was a lead-pipe cinch that when the missing agent failed to muster for the next plan of the day, a half dozen gunmen from the present or the future would paste my face on their targets at the pistol range and then I'd be in deep serious trouble.

And, so, to prevent my looming demise, I had acted upon Raymond Templeton's advice and used the prototype model to plot my escape for no other reason than my course could not be traced by any of the newer models. I could go to a new world, a new timeline or a new past where the accursed translocator hadn't been invented. But I couldn't go on from there, and I could never come back. I would be stuck.

All I had to do was to push one button to initiate the sequence.

Monica was looking at some papers on my desk with great curiosity. She took them up and scanned them quickly. "Something you've written?" she asked.

"Random thoughts of a mad iconoclast," said I.

"Do you mind?"

"No."

TO THINK OF TIME
To think of time—of all that retrospection!
To think of to-day, and the ages continued henceforward!

Have you guess'd you yourself would not continue?
Have you dreaded these earth-beetles?
Have you fear'd the future would be nothing to you?
Is to-day nothing? Is the beginningless past nothing?
If the future is nothing, they are just as surely nothing.
To think that the sun rose in the east!
That men and women were flexible, real, alive!
That everything was alive!
To think that you and I did not see, feel, think, nor bear our part!
To think that we are now here, and bear our part!
Not a day passes—not a minute or second, without an accouchement!
Not a day passes—not a minute or second, without a corpse!
Walt Whitman

THIRTEEN

"Time is the substance from which I am made. Time is a river which carries me along, but I am the river; it is a tiger that devours me, but I am the tiger, it is a fire that consumes me, but I am the fire."
Jorge Louis Borges

HOW BRIGHTLY WE BURN

Stretch sensually. Inhale. Exhale. Settle into exquisite dreams that don't exist when we manage to untangle our minds in the morning.

How brightly we burn in our time. How brightly! But was the Architect who struck this fire so derisive as to extinguish the flame forever at the final trembling exhalation?

The heavens burn with the fires of a billion stars that, one by one, explode into darkness. As above, so below, we are admonished. Inhale. Exhale. Burn. Oxidize.

Oh, how brightly we might burn if we could but believe we might burn forever. How brightly! And might we not? The mighty kings of old believed that, once their fire faded here, they became stars of the heavens. And once the fire of their star failed in heaven, they became again men of Earth.

Can it be so?

There is just this much fire. The Architect can hold it all in one hand and it wouldn't weigh an ounce.

Every star, embraced by a zillion cubic miles of blackness will burn brightly for an appointed time and die.

Inhale. Exhale. Burn. Die.

Hug the pillow and tug the comforter over your shoulders. Settle into the senseless dreams that confound us so when we manage to untangle our tangled

thoughts in the morning.

Morning. How brightly it burns!

Light streams through an open window; the fire of a single star just this far from exploding into a trillion shards of darkness. But, how brightly it burns in its time. Oh, how brightly!

What is the speed of darkness?

The trees shed their burning autumn coats of many colors, drop them to the ground in rustling heaps, there to vanish, and slumber through the silent winter of gloom. Will we sleep as well in our own silent winters, I wonder.

Inhale. Exhale. Sleep. Burn.

The mystery of our self-extinguishing fire lies in the force it doesn't use; its ability to find its way to the far side of the Architect's multiverse while, with irresolute ambivalence, unable to comprehend the Architect's complex formula— that stultifying equation of zeros to the billionth power—a part of us simply stands sullenly and watches the fire explode into darkness.

Yet, how brightly we burn in our time!

Can it be by accident alone that we are here, wherever it is that we have fallen? Can it be that our fire made its way across light years of elsewhen only to discover the portal opened upon little more than a murky swamp?

One cell creature, burning brightly with a fire it could not feel, could not understand. Inhale. Exhale. Eat and be eaten. Burn and Die. Swim or sink.

Transform. Transmogrify. Transmigrate. Trans-mutate. Trance.

Tiniest of things seen only under a microscope, burning with defiant fire, seeking the dry land, reaching for the wide, imperious sky, streaming one by one into the vast burning forest, coiling and gleaming one upon the other in shafts of light until they are lost in the greening shade. Wind and rain did not perplex them. Scudding clouds borne by burning air, hurrying shadows beneath, did not perplex them.

Is that what we were? Have we come so far from the dim shadows of the forest that we can no longer remember how brightly we burned there; storm and dust forgotten, the corroded wheels of time all broken and laid aside?

Or were we never that? Were we more? (Why can't we remember?) Or Less? Or nothing at all even now? Was there always only the Architect's Fire burning brightly in the immortal furnace? (And why can't we remember?)

We have sprinkled the flame with holy water; not to make the great flame greater, but to make the greater flame less in a vain attempt to comprehend it. The failing light tenders no terror within us. Our understanding fails proportionally to the fading glow. It seems natural to let go the fragrance of the Architect. (Why can't we remember what It smelled like?)

Alpha and Omega brightly burning.

From those to whom fire is given much is expected. Inhale (but remember

to turn away from the smoke). Exhale (but remember to cover your mouth). Lean toward the light (but remember to shade your eyes). Don't look too deeply into the past lest you discover there something you wish not to know.

Keep the faith. Remember the covenant. Hands off! Don't touch! Mustn't pry off the lid to see what's inside. Ix-nay, Pandora. Taboo. It's either something dreadful or it's nothing at all. In either case, we lose a little more of the fire.

Believing without a shred of empirical evidence, is what faith is. And, so, we leave the lid untouched. The fire fades and we pretend not to notice. Each day the depth of our vision is diminished. Darkly through the glass we see the veil is coarse and heavy; woof and warp tightly loomed.

Dimly we perceive that it is a dream, a phantasm of troubled minds like a disease we have caught from others somewhere along the way, singing hosannas in a dimly lit room smelling of candle wax and spilled sacramental wine.

Men of dark cloth seeking fame and acclaim on the quick roads to glory bid us to leap headlong into the baptismal pool if we dare and, once in, we wonder if we should get out while we still can.

But can we?

Little do we understand that water extinguishes fire when we are coaxed into the crystal pool. Little do we understand the words uttered darkly that we will emerge different, changed from what we were when we plunged thoughtlessly into its unknown depths. What life was left beneath its rippling tides? How much of the Original Fire was quenched there?

And what did we become when again we set our feet upon dry land? We understand the significance of immersion only later: Now we must believe what the men of dark cloth believe or to hell with us!

Why do men of dark cloth believe they can improve the Lux Aeterna by dousing it with holy water? What was the true meaning of their words when they told us that, once we were bathed in that divine water, we would not seek the empty world again? What was so wrong with the Fire and the World that they had to minimize it so?

Simple hopes and dreams of humankind are skewered on the barbs of reasonable doubt. Is it a dream? And are we brave enough to face the pale rider waiting just beyond the reach of the snarling watchdogs? Are we brave enough to leave the wane, unhappy ghosts of departed friends and lovers to whatever fate awaits them, our old, blind hands groping for some small joy that does not vex our minds?

One door closes; another opens, said the men of dark cloth. They saved the secret door for last and jealously kept it for themselves. History will damn their death-cold lies and expose them for the cruel mad demagogues they are.

Is it but a dream that wounds our hearts day upon day, lifetime upon lifetime, defying reason, dashing the hopes of believers and skeptics alike? Unfath-

omable mystery, this one unquestioned Miracle, encompassing every attribute of the Architect, power within itself, the whole greater than any part, omnipresent and in its own light higher and wider than heaven. It is more than we can even imagine, this incorporeal being, who, in the infinity of space, perceives all things as One.

We struggle toward the Light, seeking everywhere the true commandments, the eternal power that binds everything into the One. And find it not.

And so we invent the dream, the myth, the Miracle to sustain us in our anguish at having not discovered the endless joy; gathering here only a shell, there a pebble, here a fragment of bone, there a parched page of scripture, turning them one by one and expecting to find a message inscribed on the bottom: ***Made By God***.

And while our attention is diverted thus, the whole truth flees from us into the vastness of the cosmos.

We are like bandits, leading two lives in a vain attempt to hide our true selves from the never-sleeping eyes of a fearful warden, the gatekeeper and the celestial accountant who knows our name, age and every sin the men of dark cloth insist we have committed.

Men of the dark cloth have made of us wild-eyed sorcerers seeking to sweep away the cobwebs of their ancient sophistry to wage war against Chaos. They point at us with trembling, frightened fingers and mock us as madmen who will inherit nothing less than the everlasting Fire.

That which we thought was light is merely the shadow of something we cannot see. That which we believe is life is but a desolate mirage that will desert us at the final hour to leave us the poorer for our trust. What can it mean? The throbbing anthill with its thousand eyes, the terrible sky with its billion lights, all to be dimmed and crushed under the scourge of the lasting Fire. What does it mean?

Birth, the manifesting of intelligence into flesh on earth, is nothing more than the beginning of death. Life! We dare not let it languish! We dare not indulge in Passion's Despair!

Birth and life and death are driven to their final night before Time's merciless and unforgiving scythe and all the while the chapel bell peals a mournful tocsin. Who could have dreamed it, and what does it mean?

The tools we have forged outlast the men who use them, and what does it mean? How strange that inanimate things should outlast us. What in the world does it mean? This tiny grain of sand that bears us relentlessly about the sun in trails of electric mist will one day burn in the fire that gives it life, and none living shall outlast it. How brightly shall it burn! And what does it mean?

The Great pyramids have outlasted their builders by sixty centuries. The words of the prophets have prevailed twenty centuries after they were spoken. What does it mean? Why did they bother to tell us at all?

Those who follow the Architect's Law say we have no need to know. It is enough to simply believe it has meaning after all. I am troubled by their veiled words and decrees. It seems unreasonable to simply believe. Shall I not learn, one day, that heaven is nothing more than a middling dream, without substance, without promise?

Men of dark cloth, convinced that if they remove their hands from the Light it will dim and fade and flicker and fail forever—as if their hands alone sustain that Fire—stand stoically, eyes glazed and fixed upon some distant horizon we cannot discern, and recite their rote message: "It is enough to simply believe. How can you doubt His power from whom all blessings flow? World without end. Amen. Amen."

And, Oh, their words trouble me greatly for they raise more questions to be answered, but are answered not by any of them. By their incompletion, they have stolen my faith that, once, even Despair was powerless to destroy.

Is it but a dream in the mind of a fitful sleeper? What will happen when it awakens? Have we gone astray from the Light, from Truth, from the path that leads to Completion? How shall we now return to the crumbling walls that sheltered us from the lie when the walls are no more to be found and the lie is greater than truth ever was?

Forgive. Forget.

We forgive and forget and, in forgetting, remember but vaguely how brightly we once burned. Through all the abysmal depths of space we are blown as dust motes by a cold, dark wind we cannot feel, driven by a music we cannot hear while Hope creeps about our feet like a hungry cat.

Gods of gold. Gods of clay. Not one to lend an ear to misery and discontent. Cold crucified arms outstretched to embrace cold silence, cold air, empty room. There is no fire in the image there on the altar. It is the bleakness of the fathomless sea; ice of the barren Arctic. Its color is fair but the fire was not struck in the image and it cannot, does not, will not, hear our lament.

If the Architect is anything at all, it is indifferent. It has other stars to spawn, other bones to pick. It yawns and settles into a mad dream of tomorrow, shrugging off today, unconcerned how slightly we burn. How slightly these days. How slightly.

Here now! What is that millennial beast who trudges drunkenly toward Jerusalem to be born, its hour come 'round at last? How brightly it burns in its time!

See how brightly it burns! It moves like fire within fire there before me, its deathless torch arching madly above, exalting all weakness to power, whispering with such faith that even the elect must be deceived.

How brightly it burns, Promethean fire all around, scorning all before it. "Take this splendor into the New Age I shall command," it wails. "Carry it into the

land I dare not tread.''

How brightly burns the torch as, passed from hand to hand along the timeless corridor, it transforms the dull to keen, mean to gentle, lumbering to swift.

But it is the wizard behind the curtain, blinding all with parlor tricks only slightly more seductive than those whose torch is failing in the long desolate hallway behind. It is a thief in the night, beckoning all who would follow to become kings among men, gods among the profane; higher, taller, stronger, wiser, infinitely illuminated.

And see how brightly it burns. How lovely the flame, promising comfort and succor to all who would yield to its promises.

Ah-ah! Hands off! Do not touch for this, too, is forbidden. Mustn't pry off the lid to see what is inside for fear of everlasting death in, of all things, the ever consuming fire. And so that lid, as well, remains unprized.

We are led by first one steed and then the next and it is forbidden to ask the name or destination of any. Heaven or Hell? Quo Vadis, Horsemen of the Apocalypse?

No, no! Do not ask. It is forbidden. It will be enough to simply believe.

Needle point of fire in the ruined abyss below; remote, minute, sends a subtler message to those who care to listen, holds more significance to those who dare to see than all the darkness that seeks to blot it out, yet cannot dash the passions of a lifetime.

I think, therefore am I?

How brightly we burn in our time and when the fire is gone so, too, all memory of this world we leave behind; our souls in our mouths, tasting of dampened ash.

From that lonely depth comes the Eternal voice, into the gulf beneath whence all the fire had vanished, scudding like a ship before the gale, while all around surges the mighty sea-sound of sighing rushes, one vast ebb and flow of peace, beyond earth's pain, so calm, so quiet it seems the wet nurse song, the deep soft breathing of the universal fire into the rekindled mind of man.

As I listen, that sweet voice becomes an invocation moving like fire in light among the thoughts of heaven, transforming the mortal self-soul flame into immortal consciousness.

Is there not one among us who can translate to music this long dark fight for truth? Is there not one among us to touch with beauty this long battle for the light, to grant some small victory for the spirit of man?

That which neither eyes nor self-soul can see seems doomed to defeat and is yet unconquerable, streaming through countless time nearer to the stars once exclusively claimed by the blind, blood-emboldened Caliphs of old.

This is the most we believe: the consciousness of man, released from the soul-self at death, might once more burn in heaven.

We catch the fire from those who went before, the bearers of the torch, whether of the lie or of the truth, who could not see the goal toward which they strained. We catch their fire and carry it only a little way nearer the veil. But there must be others who wait for it; those who will carry it onward, perhaps endlessly without reward.

Is there no epic ballad for those who strove for light but could not dream even of the victory they longed so to win? No ballad for the prisoners of the lie who handed on the torch from age to age; who, step by step, drove back the night and grappled, year on year, for one more glimpse among the stars of Sovereign Fire? No paean for those who, searching inward, saw the flame dissolving into a new abyss, and strove to build and to rebuild our squandered world?

Dreamers of dreams are all faded now, grist for the mill of heaven. The rusted wheels complain and slow in their orbits. Time is ending, the wheels of heaven grinding to a halt. The appointed time seems nearer than ever before, darkly foretold by dreaming men of dark cloth.

Builders of our hope, the healers and binders of wounds, who, while tyrants drench the world with blood can, in the faint, small crackle of a flickering hearth, grapple with death like Heracles to save one frightened, wounded child; knowing, even as they do, that the children are doomed for there is no one to kiss their sunward lifted faces, no beneficent eye to adore them.

And what does it all mean?

Is there no song to touch this living universe with ultimate light, the glimmer of that great fire which over our ruined altars yet shall break in pure light to deliver us from greater terror than even Lucifer knew?

In the gloom of waxen tapers the dreamer lifts up his eyes to whatever gods might listen, pointing to the skies through the wilderness of Time and Space while the quivering organ rends the darkness.

But the dreamer finds no lamp unto his feet, no Balm in Gilead, no guide to lead him forward toward the splendor from which (he was told) he sprang; to which (he was promised) he would return. The truth he seeks lies at his fingertips, unexplored, ignored while the dumb half-circle of the choir inhales deeply, awaiting the prompt for the first note, each voice jealous only of the voice beside it.

In the chapel vault chanted hymns ring on the heavy air while luckless errant kneeling monks and pious nuns imprisoned there sing their vespers orisons; inhaling, exhaling, burning in their appointed time and dying without so much as wondering why or what it all means, or to whom they vow allegiance. They give no voice to that and are mute.

By what name shall we conjure the Messiah to restore us to faith, to bring us into heaven and show us the way to Light and Truth? Adad, Marduk, Adonis, Aesclepius, Apollo, Dionysus, Heracles, Zeus, Alcides, Attis, Baal, Buddha, Krishna, Hermes, Hesus, Horus, Osiris, Serapis, Indra, Ieo, Issa, Jupiter, Jove, Mithra, Wodin,

Prometheus, Quetzalcoatl, Salivahana, Tammuz, Thor, Zoroaster?

To whom do these gods answer; to whom do they grant favor?

Is it a dream that in those dark dominions beyond this mortal coil we shall find life everlasting? Is the light we behold in our eyes alone? Could the Djinn conjured by Aladdin while rubbing that old patina-stained lamp promise less? Is that promise, like the sun-fractured rainbow, a mirage held together by falling mists? The certainty of the universe and the spirit of man are destroyed for want of proof, and what does it all mean?

Our human nature could not be
Content with rest like this,
And even bliss could cloy, if we
Had nothing else but bliss.
Great Nature's hand, in every plan,
Had laid in wise design,
But what design, or use, is in
This theory of thine?
If, when our earth-career is done,
All conscious life must cease,
And we drift on, and on, and on,
In endless, dreamy peace—
If Heaven is but a mystic spell,
Whose glowing visions thrall,
Why should we have a life beyond?
Why have a Heaven at all?
A Thought of Heaven—Madge Morris; 1881

The goal of life is not a peaceful death; nor an instant entrance into heaven as an abode where the pious shall eternally live; nor is it the ultimate satisfying of a God of extreme justice; the "eye for an eye" God of the fear-stricken men of dark cloth.

One purpose alone persuades us, like the Navigator's star lighting the path of the mariner on life's troublesome sea: the attainment of the understanding through which is revealed to our consciousness the real and the unreal; the eternal substance of Truth.

There can be no other purpose in the pursuit of either religion or philosophy or politics than this.

Unceasing rites and ceremonies of contemplation; renunciation; prayers; fasting; penance; devotion; service; adoration; or isolation, cannot insure the attainment of Truth.

There will be no bartering; no assurance of reward for good conduct. It is

not as though one would say, "Ah, ah, my child, if thou wouldst purchase Truth thou shalt follow this recipe and none other."

There is no golden promise of speedy entrance into Light, nor any exact rules, or laws or equations by virtue of which Truth is attained. Nor yet any specific time to serve before that final illumination.

"I am persuaded," said Paul the Apostle and adherent to Mithraism, "that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God."

For whom and of whom did he believe he was speaking?

Interpreted in the light of cosmic consciousness, we begin to understand that we might know and experience that boundless, deathless, perfect, satisfying, complete and all-embracing love which is the goal of immortality—which is the only speakable attribute of the Architect.

The things for which we sigh are the things we can never reach. We hold so carelessly and lightly the treasures that might lead us from the darkness. We contemplate an unknowable future or dwell on scenes of the grim and faded past rather than live in the present which so quickly hastens from us. The prizes for which we toil, so seemingly tempting today, prove to be, when pressed to our breasts, but worthless illusions. We grasp at shadows that spring unbidden from the deep wells of our minds, then flit from us as swiftly as fireflies, while that which casts the shadow stands in our way unsought. And we wonder, and wonder, what was it that shivered at the edges of our eyes, never dreaming that if we shift our gaze but a little we might find it.

We feel Truth trembling at the edges of our memory, stray glimmers of thought near the rim of our understanding. We look and find it not; deep shadows pass like cadres of murmuring priests between.

And what meaning has it?

Let free the Fire of Heaven! Give each child union with that Fire within each life, the flame not to be found until, searching deeper through the inward-opening door, each child alone meets the unknowable and eternal Light, if it is to be found at all.

. . . . .

"Where the profane drink, all fountains are poisoned. Are the profane also necessary for life? Are poisoned fountains necessary, and stinking fires, and filthy dreams, and mealworms in the bread?"

Thus Spake Zarathustra

. . . . .

Men of dark cloth close their eyes and minds, and hold their noses and beg for power. They trip us in the darkness, mock us with their scolding eyes and change their story, making it all the more difficult to comprehend, all the more

unbelievable. Nowhere in their scriptures are the words "immortal" and "soul" used together. Why have they deceived us?

They pluck the mystery of life from the pages of their sermons and quench the only lights that might have saved us. Their clever words of art kill the song in our hearts and our laughter fades. Even our dreams grow old.

Flesh is weak and blood is thicker than water. Truth will out and thoughts like angels come and go. Eyes dimmed by age that once through the deep soul gazed, see not. Ears foiled by two thousand years of contradiction no longer hear. Tired, withered hands grope for love and come away with nothing.

We nod fitfully in our nightmarish sleep and claw at the empty air before us. Our fingers come back twisted and thin, our dreams but dust in the barren fields of our minds. We dream things dreamed of long ago when we were children, in distant days when dreams were trifling but were all we needed.

And what does it portend?

The threadbare fabric of the cosmos is rent by the fires of Vulcan's forge and still we burn. With dark, smouldering eyes and naked limbs, reciting endlessly the old lie, "Death Shall Have No Dominion," we go down into the crumbling earth, cold and dark and smelling of decay and worms.

And, there, shall burn no more.

Though we be as dust, is the Architect mindful of us? If so, why so? If not, why not? Can we do nothing in life that the fire will not erase in the end? Is all that we behold no more than electric impulses on the brain, flimsy threads that bind a boundless cosmos of imagination into an unknowable something we call First Cause to hide our ignorance? And what does it mean in any event? What does it matter?

Stretch sensuously. Breathe deeply. In that pure realm whose darkness is our peace we settle into the nightmares that persist even if we manage to untangle our tangled minds in the morning.

The dark veil has again fallen across the far fields of space, our Captain is dead, the precious cargoes of our lives are heaped, wasted and rotting, in the hold, and the astrolabe is wrecked with the salt of twenty centuries.

Orion winks wickedly above, the forbidden fruit that so troubled Eden is gnarled and mouldy as hoarfrost, the Miracle is found to be, at best, a mirage, and Aladdin's lamp is lost forever.

How close we all come to dying, trapped in these little moments, these little unrelated vignettes, unaware of why we are here, oblivious of the journey, unconcerned about the destination. How close we come to dying before the reaper swoops down like the wrath of God to wipe out everything. How hopelessly flawed we are that we are unable to see it or understand it or convey it to others.

* * * * *

Monica Dodd nodded ever so slightly, placed the papers carefully on the

desk.

"So you believe we're just cogs in some great, clanking, intelligent machine?"

I shrugged, lips pursed noncommitally.

"But all the cogs must work properly, mustn't they?" she mused.

"If you say so."

"Well, it's clever. You're more clever than you let on."

"Some of my former collegues would say that makes me dangerous."

"Are you?"

"Dangerous?"

"Yes."

"No. I am tired, I am old, and I am concerned that terrible things are going to happen. There will be no way to prevent them or end them, ever again."

Monica smiled her charming smile and left without asking what I intended to do. It was just as well. I could only have told her a monstrous lie that she would have seen through even as the words left my lips. No need to trouble her. She had woes enough facing her in the next few days to fill several lives.

I had a few hours before anyone would come looking for me, at least as far as I could determine from scanning the Regenesis alternatives. It had occurred to me that the sappers from the future might have translocators that also could not be tracked; after all, armies could not permit such things either in the present or in the future. It seemed wise to initiate my escape sequence as quickly as practical.

If I had given it more thought, or had I more time to reconsider, I might not have pushed the button. But if I had learned anything in the past few days it was that one cannot live in two or more separate realities at the same time. It is much too stressful, particularly when agents from both the present and the future had designs upon my longevity. I could imagine the mental problems future soldiers would experience jumping from one theater of operations to another and trying to keep them all separated in their minds.

Monica hadn't asked me how I had managed to lure the gunman sixty-four million years into the past only to strand him there with no way back. She had either guessed that I had the older prototype or it hadn't yet occurred to her that I could have used the newer translocator to get us there and the older to get us back. Maybe she just hadn't time to work it out. Or maybe she had worked it out by viewing my movements with Regenesis, and would use it again to appear at just the wrong moment to prevent my escape.

What was clear to me was that Monica hadn't bothered to find out why technocrats in the year 2025 were so frantically manufacturing time machines by the tens of thousands. She was too busy trying to pinch a purseful of them to pause and ask why anyone in their right mind would create and mass produce devices

that would allow millions of people to translocate to other worlds, other times and other galaxies.

But I had taken time to find out and what I found beyond 2025 convinced me it was prudent to leave this timeline forever.

All the oil production in every nation had peaked in 2020. Food production was severely cut because farm equipment could no longer operate. Automobiles were no longer manufactured. Computers and home appliances were no longer being made. All airlines, shipping lines, rail lines and trucking lines were bankrupt. Only a few military aircraft and ships were still functioning, and they at only about twenty percent of late twentieth century rates. People who couldn't grow or process their own food were starving by the millions. Bandits robbed people, not for money, but for food and firewood. Governments were in disarray; many nonexistent. Rich people hoarded food and poor people killed to get it.

No one made clothing or bedding. No one had a job that paid a weekly or monthly paycheck. No one built new homes. There was no paint, no goods at all that required petroleum products, no tires for any kind of vehicle. No one manufactured ammunition for the few firearms that had not been confiscated or stolen. There was no heating oil, no fresh water. Societies everywhere were on the verge of permanent and catastrophic failure. There were no functioning hospitals, even for the military.

Millions of people were translocating by 2025 to one of twenty other planets selected by scientists and government agencies. Most of them, entire families, shifted to nothing, to emptiness, to death.

Life had got too complicated.

I couldn't remember when last I had slept or when I had eaten. I was tired and hungry and I was having considerable difficulty keeping track of how many times and in which direction I had translocated. I felt desperate to find a sanctuary.

FOURTEEN

I lie on my back, sleeping in a dimly lighted room, my head turned to the left. A cool sheet is beneath me. Faint light enters from an uncurtained window. Far away, walking toward me across a barren, red desert, I dream a male figure dressed in a shimmering uniform. He appears and vanishes like a mirage in the rising thermals, always and ever drawing nearer and nearer. After what seems hours the man is beside me, looming above. He raises his hand to his brow, rolls his eyes skyward and sinks wearily to his knees, falls dead, face down, into the burning sand. As he falls, I see that I am the man.

At the same moment, an anomolous cloud bursts from the still figure, whirling and rising above me, then rushes downward, exploding within me silently, painlessly.

The house has a green roof. It is painted white, chipped and peeling. There is a brick carpark and a sagging garage beneath a broad Catalpa tree behind; tall Maples line the street beside and in front. The ceilings are high, the windows tall, the wallpaper is stained and faded. There are two stairways; one in the living room foyer and one at the rear entrance. They lead to rooms on the second floor. I know the rooms are there although I have never been on the second floor, have never seen the stairs.

I am in the bedroom of a ten-month old infant boy. He sleeps fitfully on his back, his head turned to the left. He is dreaming of a man walking toward him across the broad, awful Martian desert. He was breach born and dead, this tiny boy; revived after long, anxious minutes.

I have become the child. He and I are one forever, body and soul.

I am the dreamer and the dreamed, dead and reborn.

I will remember the dream all my life but of the events that have occurred before this night I will have no memory for many years.

It is July 10, 2025. This planet Earth is at peace, its nations rich and content. The devotions of its inhabitants are not to war but to the exploration of the cosmos, and it is into this atmosphere that baby Richard Carroll Constable is given a soul to nurture and guard.